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Andreia Filipa Lázaro Sarabando

Beckett on Film: Memória, Repetição e o Corpo

Beckett on Film: Memory, Repetition and the Body

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Dr. Anthony David Barker, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

palavras-chave

Beckett, cinema, performance, memória, repetição, corpo.

resumo

O presente trabalho propõe-se examinar o projecto póstumo que adaptou 19 peças de Samuel Beckett para o cinema, *Beckett on Film*, à luz de três grandes aspectos temáticos: memória, repetição e o corpo. Neste processo, os textos das peças que originaram os filmes, bem como relatos de performances importantes, serão usados como termos de comparação para estabelecer possíveis (e previsíveis) diferenças no tratamento destes assuntos fulcrais na obra do autor que possam ser originadas pela mudança de medium que este projecto representa. A realização de um projecto desta importância e envergadura, e que se pretende apresentar como uma obra definitiva e canónica, levanta questões de agência, identidade nacional e relevância da obra do actor no panorama cultural internacional que serão debatidas com a legitimidade do projecto *Beckett on Film* em mente. Aspectos práticos que se prendem com a realização do projecto também serão tidos em consideração, e é traçado um paralelo entre *Beckett on Film* e *Film* (o único filme que Beckett fez).

keywords Beckett, film, performance, memory, repetition, body

abstract This study examines the posthumous project that adapted 19 plays by Samuel Beckett to the screen, *Beckett on Film*, under three broad thematical aspects: memory, repetition and the body. In this process, the texts of the plays as well as accounts of important performances are used as means of comparison to establish possible (and predictible) differences in the treatment of these fulcral issues to the work of the author that might be originated by the change of medium that this project represents. The making of a project of this relevance and size, and one that tries to establish itself as a definite and canonical work, raises questions of agency, national identity and the international relevance of Beckett's work that will come under scrutiny with the legitimacy of *Beckett on Film* in mind. Practical aspects related to the making of the project will be taken into consideration, and a parallel between *Beckett on Film* and *Film* (the only film Beckett made) will be established.

BECKETT ON FILM: MEMORY, REPETITION AND THE BODY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Collected Shorter Plays	*CSP*
The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett	*GCSB*

INTRODUCTION: POSTHUMOUS BECKETT

No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.
- Samuel Beckett, *Film*

In his fulcral study *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin sums up the theme of absurdist plays broadly as a "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (24) and adds that "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senseless of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (24). This "rational approach" Esslin refers to is that of Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and other existentialist philosophers, who shared similar views on life and human beings' being-in-the-world with the absurdist dramatists, but who tried to express those views in highly rational and coherent discourse. By abandoning logical exposition altogether, playwrights such as Samuel Beckett sought to approach form and content on the assumption that the best way to portray the absurdity of life is to show absurd situations. Thus Hamm and Clov's famous lines

> HAMM: We're not beginning to… to… mean something?

> CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh)* Ah, that's a good one! (*Endgame*, 27)

These lines provide a clear expression of Beckett's technique of conveying the meaninglessness of rationality through plays which do not follow a linear path of rational thought.

In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life and Thought*, the mammoth enterprise that brought C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski together to make an A to Z encyclopaedia of Beckett, the authors contend that, although insightful and ultimately useful, Esslin's study may have contributed to an early pigeonholing of Beckett's work, particularly in its eagerness to align his work with that of other authors writing at the same time. No doubt the post-war zeitgeist can be identified, the sense of the world gone wrong, the realisation of the unlimited capacity for human cruelty, the feeling of wandering aimlessly and even the meaninglessness of existence, however the association of Beckett with Ionesco and anti-literature were found to be problematic. But contexts need to be provided, comparisons established, references given and in this process some generalizations are inescapable, so not totally unlike Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* starts off by trying to establish the influences that shaped the author's oeuvre:

> [a]rguably the pre-eminent avant-garde writing of the post- World War II era, a period we loosely call "postmodern," Beckett's work is equally the culmination of the Romantic agony; he is at once the emblematic deconstructive author and the heir to Kant and Schopenhauer (despite their emphasis on the phenomenal world), if not to Hume. In other words, his celebrated innovation and his assault on literary convention are themselves rooted in

> discernable literary and cultural traditions, as much pre- as post-modern, his sensibility reaching back to the classical – that classicism leavened by both late Romanticism and post-humanism. His celebrated aporia finally may be as rooted in pre-Socratic as in poststructuralist thought (ix).

Beckett's work is situated in this fashion at the intersection of several literary, artistic and cultural traditions, of nearly all of which he was a connoisseur. A true post-war renaissance man, Beckett was knowledgeable about the classics as well as being ahead of his time. As we would expect, he was certainly not bound to the past, as stated yet again by James Knowlson in "Looking Back, but Leaping Forward":

> [o]f all twentieth century artists writing in English, largely as a result of his excellent command of English, French, Italian and German, Beckett was probably the most fully aware of the entire range of European artistic achievement, that of the ancient literary and artistic past and the radical literary and artistic movements of his own century (31).

For the most part, critics concentrate on Beckett's links to the literary part of "literary and artistic", although clearly his intensely-developed visuality has widespread ramifications with respect to the much wider "artistic achievement" than that articulated in words alone. Indeed, Beckett's work owes a lot to the visual arts, particularly painting. Images from paintings he admired made their way into his drama. Among those acknowledged in Ackerley and Gontarski ("Art" 19-24), the ones that stand out are *Waiting for Godot*, which drew inspiration from Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (figures 1 and 2);

Figure 1 – Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1930)

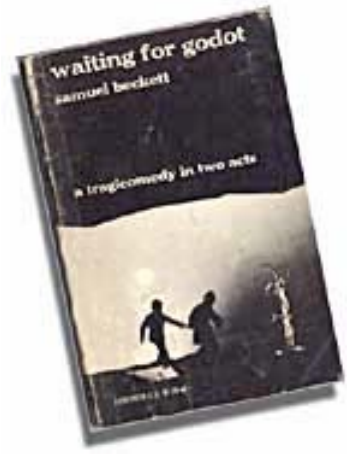

Figure 2 – *Waiting for Godot*, book cover of the first edition by Grove Press

the figure of Hamm, which is reminiscent of Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X; *Rockaby*, which bears a certain resemblance to Rembrandt's, Whistler's and van Gogh's depictions of aging mothers (figure 3 and 4);

Figure 3 – Whistler's Mother

Figure 4 – *Rockaby* (*Beckett on Film*)

and *Footfalls*, famously described by Billie Whitelaw as "a moving, musical, Edvard Munch painting" (quoted in Knowlson. *Damned to Fame*, 551), and which bears resemblance particularly to *The Scream* (figures 5 and 6).

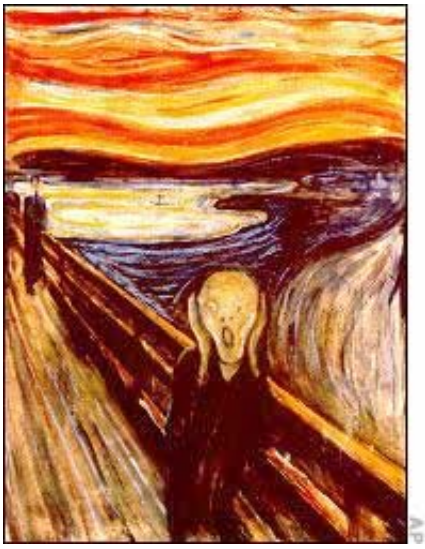

Figure 5 – Edvard Munch's *The Scream*

Figure 6 – Billie Whitelaw in the premiere of *Footfalls*, directed by Beckett

In fact, the visual arts are so important to Beckett's writing that his later work relies more on striking images than on the words being spoken or heard, as in *Play* and *Not I* where intelligibility is compromised for the sake of visual effect.

Music also played a large part in Beckett's work, informing it both thematically and structurally. Beckett himself was an accomplished pianist, and an avid consumer of music, both classical and contemporary.[1] Some of the composers mentioned by Mary Bryden in her introduction to *Samuel Beckett and Music* as being among those Beckett regularly listened to are Beethoven, Schubert, Haydn, Brahms, Shoenberg, Berg and Webern. Specific pieces of music and composers feature in his dramatic work (such as Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" in *All That Fall*, and *Act Without Words I* has original music composed for it by John Beckett), in *Rough for Radio I* Voice and Music are the protagonists, and both radio plays *Words and Music* (with music by John Beckett) and *Cascando* (with music by Marcel Mihalovici) can be read,

[1] Although he never owned a record player, he listened to the radio and tapes.

as their names indicate, in terms of a dialogue between two different modes of expression. Bryden sums up Beckett's affair with music in this way:

> [w]hether read aloud or silently, Beckett's careful words resemble elements of a musical score, coordinated by and for the ear, to sound and resound. They are lean and muscular, never lush. They play a discrete and discreet part in the text(ure) which they form. As well as being endowed with an intense and immediate musicality, however, they frequently create and evoke sound-scapes within the narrative itself (2).

The structuring effect of music in Beckett's work will be dealt with in more detail further ahead in this study, along with Beckett's tendency towards symmetry and repetition. For now it will suffice to show how genre bending and genre crossing were always key factors during Beckett's writing life. So much so that a "late style" in Beckett's writing for the theatre has been identified, but defining it in terms of genre has proved to be somewhat problematic. Enoch Brater's brilliant summary of Beckett's drama after *Play* (1962), *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theatre*, contends that:

> [t]o speak of Beckett's late style in the theatre is to come to grips with the need for a new kind of critical vocabulary. Drama, narrative, and poetry, the conventional categories a literary tradition has imposed on chapter and verse, seem in this instance tangential and inconvenient. Genre is under stress. The theatre event is reduced to a piece of monologue and the play is on the verge of becoming something

> else, something that looks suspiciously like a performance poem. All the while a story is being told, a fiction closely approximating the dramatic situation the audience encounters in the theatre. It is no longer possible to separate the dancer from the dance. Theatre technology, too, is called upon to strut and fret its hour upon the stage – more likely, in this case, limited to fifteen or twenty minutes. Lighting (...) and especially mechanical recording devices, frame the action, advance the plot, and function more like dramatic principals than incidental side effects. Something is taking its course, but this particular course, in such efficient stage terms, is one that has not been taken before. (3)

Besides the ones pointed out by Brater, there are other aspects to Beckett's late work in the theatre which are of crucial importance, such as that indicated by S.E. Gontarski in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: The Shorter Plays*: "[t]hat Beckett was re-creating his dramatic corpus, reinventing himself as a dramatist, rewriting history in effect during his mid-1960s period, is a perspective of singular critical significance, and yet one largely ignored in current theatre history" (xv). Gontarski also identifies the period around the time when *Play* was written and first staged as the time when Beckett "increased his direct advisory role in productions of his work and as he took the next step and finally began taking full charge of directing his own plays" (xv). Still according to Gontarski, "[t]he experiences of staging himself had a double effect, altering his writing of new plays and, as important, offering him the opportunity to rethink, rewrite, and so complete previously published work" (xv). In the general editor's note to *The Theatrical Notebooks* series, James Knowlson points out that "some of the stage directions or, in the case of *Waiting for Godot*, with Beckett as

director or aide to the director, whole sections of the text have *never* been played as printed in the original editions" (v). The facts highlighted by both Gontarski and Knowlson justify the need for the *Theatrical Notebooks*, but they also reveal much of the importance and the danger presented by *Beckett on Film* – a posthumous recorded product which started being shot in the same year that the last volume of the *Notebooks* came out – 1999.

A dramatic text is never a definite work, a point which is made all the stronger when Beckett's work method is observed. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* came out between 1993 and 1999. Comprising four volumes,[2] this series of books collects Beckett's production books and annotated copies of the plays in a facsimiled edition, along with the revised texts. Through this collection, many texts are printed for the first time as they have actually always been performed, and with Beckett not being around anymore, these books are definite authorities on how the plays should be staged. Indeed, a significant amount of work by Beckett has been published posthumously. Besides the *Theatrical Notebooks*, both his first play, *Eleutheria* (1947), and his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), came out after the author's death, in 1989. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* was refused publication by Samuel Beckett for many years because he came to think of it as immature and, after seeing it refused by various publishers, he used much of it for *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) and *Murphy* (1938). However, Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier were allowed to edit and publish it after his death, and after an aborted attempt at cooperation with John Calder, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* was published by the Black Cat Press in 1992. *Eleutheria* was

[2] *Waiting for Godot*, edited by James Knowlson and Dougald McMillan (1994); *Endgame*, edited by S.E. Gontarski (1993); *Krapp's Last Tape*, edited by James Knowlson (1993); *The Shorter Plays* ["Play", *Footfalls*, *Come and Go*, "What Where", *That Time*, "Eh Joe" and *Not I*], edited by S.E. Gontarski (1999).

also published after Beckett's death.[3] Despite Beckett's insistence that the play should not be published, in 1995 the first play Beckett ever wrote saw the light of day at the hands of Foxrock (translation by Michael Brodsky),[4] and one year later, by Faber and Faber (translation by Barbara Wright), not without controversy and the threat of legal procedure on the part of the Beckett estate.

Critical work also keeps pouring off the press, and some of it, like *The Grove Companion to Samuel Becket*, tries to establish itself as canonical by means of its comprehensiveness and self-proclaimed authority. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (1997), the posthumous biography by James Knowlson is now considered to be the best biography of Beckett, whereas Deirdre Bair's *Samuel Beckett: a Biography* (1978) has been discredited.[5] This attention is no mere academic fashion. Samuel Beckett holds the title of the most influential playwright of the 20th century, and that is certainly due to *Waiting for Godot*, the first English performance of which ran for over 250 nights (first at the New Arts Theatre, then at the Criterion Theatre, both in

[3] Although parts of the play had already been published.

[4] This publisher was set up by Barney Rosset (with John Oakes and Dan Simon) to publish *Eleutheria*, after he sold Grove Press and was replaced as editor in chief, in 1986. *Film*, which had been commissioned by Rosset, is also commercialised by Foxrock.

[5] Bair's biography is thought of as unscholarly and inaccurate, but it is probably its inelegant revealing of intimate details about Beckett's life while he was still alive that has secured it so much disfavour. However, it remains a useful tool and a record of statements provided by those who were close to Beckett. For a detailed discussion of this subject, see Martin Esslin's stinging chapter "The Unnamable Pursued by the Unspeakable" in his book *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett and the Media*.

London).[6] And if the internet is anything to go by in matters of popularity, a Google search using the words "Samuel Beckett" gives approximately 4,430,000 hits.[7] Admittedly a large number, it doesn't mean much in absolute terms, but when compared to two other famous playwrights, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter, both of whom featured prominently in Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* alongside Beckett, with the latter being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, a search of their names gives approximately 611,000 and 3,300,000 results respectively, falling very short of Beckett's figure. But Beckett still has a way to go to reach the most famous playwright of all time, William Shakespeare, with approximately 19,200,000 results; or the results of another Irish exile, and a writer Beckett was intimately associated with, James Joyce, who gets 8,490,000 matches. In addition, entering the name of Seamus Heaney (probably the most influential living Irish writer) results in only 1,200,000 hits.

But however much academic interest is taken in Beckett, the number of people who will read "works about" is much smaller than the number of people who will see a product like *Beckett on Film*, the project that adapted all 19 of Beckett's plays for the screen after Beckett's death. Beckett's refusal to allow his plays to be made into films was legendary. Generally speaking, he resisted any sort of adaptation of his work carried out by others[8] and he once famously refused to have *Waiting for Godot* shot for the big screen by Roman

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[6] Directed by Peter Hall, with Peter Woodthorpe (Estragon), Paul Daneman (Vladimir), Timothy Bateson (Lucky), and Peter Bull (Pozzo), it premiered on 3 August 1955.

[7] Search carried out during March 2006 on www.google.com.

[8] He would however change his texts himself to suit theatre productions, and he directed a version of *What Where* for German television which involved a significant amount of adaptation of the original text.

Polanski, whose work he greatly admired. On top of this known reluctance, everybody feared the dumbing down effect that *Beckett on Film* might have on Beckett's work. And indeed there seems to have been a reason for concern when the aim of *Beckett on Film*, as stated by one of the project's producers, Alan Moloney, is to make Beckett accessible to wider audiences.[9] Whereas physical access to Beckett's work is desirable, the ambiguity of "making it accessible" might suggest an undesirable explanatory and simplifying move. Another contentious issue which caused a certain amount of distress among Beckett scholars from the outset was the involvement of famous mainstream directors, who might transform Beckett's plays into their films. Potentially, film has more audience than drama. Theatrical screening, broadcasting and rental offer far greater outlets than live performance, and one of the consequences of this is that *Beckett on Film* is liable to be the only contact with Beckett's work for many people. These and other issues have meant that *Beckett on Film* has been met by many with a high degree of apprehension.

With 2006 being the year of the 100th anniversary of Beckett's birth, Beckett scholarship is still dominated by his friends, people who knew him and worked with him – Knowlson, Gontarski, Connor – and who, for better and for worse, try to enforce what they think was Beckett's will. In addition to that, the Beckett estate, run by Edward Beckett, Samuel Beckett's nephew (the son of his brother Frank Beckett) is very strict about the legacy that it manages. The approval, by the estate, of the *Beckett on Film* project came as a surprise to many. However, the story of Beckett's relationship with other media than the theatre, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, indicates a strong wish to cross boundaries of genre and medium. Also, writing for the theatre, which he began doing in 1947, was already a switch in medium and genre for Beckett, who had written mostly fiction

[9] Interview for "Check the Gate", the documentary that collected statements of actors, directors and producers involved in the making of *Beckett on Film*.

and poetry during the previous seventeen years. In this light, *Beckett on Film* may be seen as the next logical step to take for a man who, in his lifetime, experimented with academic writing, poetry, fiction, drama, the radio, film and television.

This study looks at *Beckett on Film* with three broad themes in mind – those of memory, repetition and the body – with the intention of examining how different modulations may have affected the meanings that can be read from the texts of the plays. The directors who worked on *Beckett on Film* were forbidden to alter or omit any words in the texts. Thus, the only scope for innovation was provided by technical aspects that are specific to the medium they were dealing with, such as camera angles, close-ups, fades, zooms, the use of colour and the addition of backgrounds and occasional establishing shots that set the context for the films. How these can change what might have been meant to communicate with the plays will be under scrutiny here. An initial chapter was felt to be necessary, a chapter that looked at a Beckett film, the only one he ever made (*Film*, 1965), and compared it with the ones on *Beckett on Film* both in terms of the end results and in terms of the processes of their making. The other three chapters look into specific themes of relevance to Beckett's work and the shape these subjects take within *Beckett on Film*. Memory, repetition and the body are interrelated subjects closely bound to questions of self, identity and representation, so rather than hermetic, these chapters are osmotic, the themes complimentary, because memory, or rather, remembering and recalling are embodied modes of representation, and representing always involves a certain degree of repeating. This explains and justifies the frequent cross-referencing between these three chapters.

Paradoxically, Samuel Beckett's plays have both been perceived as the antithesis of theatre and the ultimate expression of drama's full potential due to their minimalistic treatment of the stage. On this matter, Harold Pinter reported a conversation with Beckett back in 1961, where he said: "I was in hospital once. There was a man in another ward, dying

of throat cancer. In the silence, I could hear his screams continually. That's the only kind of form my work has" (BAIR, 528). Although it sounds somewhat extreme, this affirmation can be read in terms of a universal quality to Beckett's work, for as Ionesco points out in his book of essays *Notes & Counter Notes*, Beckett's theatre focuses remorselessly on that which people are truly interested in:

> *Endgame*, by Beckett, a so-called avant-garde play is far closer to the lamentations of *Job*, the tragedies of Sophocles or Shakespeare, than to the tawdry drama known as committed or boulevard theatre. Topical drama does not last (by definition) and it does not last for the good reason that people are not truly profoundly interested in it (57).

But people *are* interested in feelings that tend towards the universal – pain, grief, regret, anger, helplessness – which is what Ionesco advocates when he calls for an art which is not dated or local: "Richard II makes me sharply conscious of the eternal truth that we forget in [committed drama], the truth we fail to think about, though it is simple and absolutely commonplace: I die, he dies, you die" (30), which in Beckett's realm translates better as "I can't die soon enough, he can't die soon enough, you can't die soon enough".

THE PERCEIVING EYE VS. THE "I" PERCEIVED: *FILM* VS. *BECKETT ON FILM*

Esse est percipi
- George Berkeley

In "The mediated Quixote: the radio and television plays, and *Film*", Jonathan Kalb refers to two reasons why Beckett's incursion into the sphere of the recordable media was a logical step to take:

> first, a perfectionist is better served by recordable media than live media because the former offer the chance to freeze and preserve (nearly) perfect performances for posterity; and second, the distinctive formal issues associated with these media – questions of subjective versus objective point of view, the benevolence or malevolence of the camera eye, and so on – coincide surprisingly well with many lifelong preoccupations of Beckett's, such as the antagonistic themes of darkness and light, sound

> and silence, and the problems of veracity and subjective identity in fictional narrative (PILLING, 125).

Kalb distinguishes a progressive sequence in the adoption of each of these media – radio (*All That Fall* (1956), *Embers* (1959), *Rough for Radio I* (1961), *Rough for Radio II* (early 1960s), *Words and Music* (1961), *Cascando* (1962)), cinema (*Film*, 1965) and television (*Eh Joe* (1965), *Ghost Trio* (1975), *...but the clouds...* (1976), *Quad* (1982), *Nacht und Träume* (1982)) –, a sequence which is both thematic and chronological,[10] and that coincides with the distilling of techniques Beckett had experimented with in the theatre. For instance, the radio was the ideal vehicle for his trademark disembodied voices and the television allowed for the erosion of the body to be achieved without the difficulties it carried in the theatre.[11] In *Film*, Beckett sought to interpret George Berkeley's maxim "*Esse est percipi*" – to be is to be perceived – using the camera in a way that conveys extraneous as well as self-perception.

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[10] According to Martin Esslin in *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett and the Media*, Beckett's affair with the television was a direct consequence of his work for the radio. In 1984, Michael Bakewell, who had been responsible for the broadcasting process of *Words and Music*, became head of the play department of BBC television and mediated the collaboration between that institution and Beckett, which resulted in the writing of the author's first television play, *Eh Joe* (150-51).

[11] An example of the former would be the dreamlike quality of *Embers*; and of the latter, the progressive close-ups on Joe's face in *Eh Joe*, which eventually focus only on the eyes, leaving the rest of his body out of sight.

Shot in New York during the summer of 1964, *Film* was written on commission for Barney Rosset, who also invited Harold Pinter and Eugène Ionesco to write original film scripts for Grove Press. Although he wasn't keen on writing on commission, Beckett saw a good opportunity to be able to control every single aspect of the production of one of his works.

Beckett had always been a film fan. In the mid 1930s he actually wrote to Sergei Eisenstein asking him to be taken in as a trainee at the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow.[12] He felt that "a backwater may be created for the two-dimensional silent film that had barely emerged from its rudiments when it was swamped" (letter to Thomas McGreevy on 6 Feb 1936, quoted in KNOWLSON, 226). This was the time when both sound and colour were taking over, but Beckett thought silent films offered endless possibilities and roughly thirty years later he made

[12] Eisenstein is said by many critics to have exerted a very strong influence on Beckett's work. J.M.B. Antoine-Dunne's article "Beckett and Eisenstein on Light and Contrapuntal Montage' for *Beckett Aujoud'hui/Beckett Today* is such an example. According to Antoine-Dunne,

> Beckett's interest in film led to his absorption of film forms, in particular those structures Sergei Eisenstein interrogated in his various writings on film montage. Eisenstein believed that film brought to fulfilment the promise of all other art forms and that film's capacity to unite time and space in movement enabled it to bridge the gap between subjective and objective reality". (315)

Although this article draws mostly on manuscripts and typescripts of *Murphy* and *Watt* to support its argument, there seems to be a connection to be made between Eisenstein's claims about film's capacities and the structuring theme of *Film*, which deals with two distinct forms of perception: one subjective and the other objective.

a film that was not only black and white, but starred one of the greatest stars of Hollywood's silent age, Buster Keaton, now well over seventy, whom Beckett had long admired. Keaton was not the first choice for *Film* though; Charlie Chaplin, Zero Mostel and Jack MacGowran were approached before, but everything else failing, Beckett was more than happy to have him play the protagonist.

The anecdotal nature of the reports of Beckett's first encounter with Buster Keaton provided by Beckett's biographers (Bair, Knowlson) reinforces the general idea about Keaton's decay into oblivion and alcoholism during the mid-thirties and after. However, in "Deadpan Afterlife", an article which accounts for Keaton's career after the golden age of silent film (but carries no mention whatsoever of his participation in *Film*), David Weddle tells of how Keaton's "popularity continued to snowball" (19) and that "[b]etween 1949 and 1966 he would appear on hundreds of television programmes" (19). "A single guest shot on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was seen in an instant by 25 million people – more than had seen any of his silent films" (19), according to Weddle. During this period of time, Keaton's sketches for the television were pretty much the same sort of pantomime that had worked so brilliantly in the 1920s (some were actual reprisals of his most memorable routines), and although the aura of innovation and novelty had disappeared from his performances, his trademark acrobatic slapstick formula still seemed to work for his new audience. Some of the most famous shows Keaton starred in the 1960s were *Candid Camera*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Route 66* and *The Today Show*. From 1956 he appeared in several TV commercials for important brands and companies (such as Colgate, Northwest Orient Airlines and Ford Motor Company), most of which he conceived himself. He worked in film projects such as *Limelight* (1952), *The Railrodder*, *Buster Keaton Rides Again* (1965), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *War Italian Style* (both 1966), as well as a fair share of television dramas (eg. *The Awakening* (1954), *The Innocent Sleep* (1958)). Throughout, Keaton enjoyed total freedom and control both over

the creative and the production phases, and as a sign of his success, Weddle points out that "[b]y the mid 60s he was making more than $150,000 a year" (19).

However, both Knowlson's, and particularly Bair's, rendering of Beckett's and Keaton's meeting emphasise the former's graciousness and the latter's discourtesy. They quote Alan Schneider, the director of *Film*, who was present when Beckett first went to the hotel where Keaton was staying. Reportedly, they were met by an overweighed underesponsive Keaton, "a bizarre remnant of the heyday of Hollywood" (BAIR, 571), who sat through a game of baseball on television, can of beer in his hand, and answered monosyllabically to both Beckett and Schneider's attempts at conversation. Schneider goes as far as saying that Keaton only accepted to do the film because he needed the money (Alan Schneider. "On Directing",[13] 67-68, quoted in BAIR, 571), which is at odds with Weddle's article for *Sight and Sound*.

One thing everybody praised Buster Keaton for was his extremely professional attitude during the shooting of *Film*, repeating every scene as many times as it took to please Beckett, without complaining, often under excruciating heat and over very long hours. He did however insist on saying that he didn't understand a thing about what was going on.[14]

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[13] On their website, www.busterkeaton.com, The Damfinos, the International Buster Keaton Society, describe this article by Schneider in these terms: "Schneider's essay displays appalling ignorance of Keaton's talent and career, and is written in a condescending tone."

[14] Keaton had also failed to make heads or tails of *Waiting for Godot*, and so he refused to play the part of Lucky in the first American production of the play "because he couldn't understand it and considered it a waste of time" (Bair, 571).

And what was going on was Beckett's usual exploration of any medium's capacities and constraints and consequent use of it in innovative ways.[15]

One sound, "sssh", at the beginning of the film highlights the fact that having no sound is a deliberate choice rather than a technical limitation. The following instructions from the script pretty much describe the film: "protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit" (*CSP*, 163). Two different qualities of image indicate that there are two perceptive entities. So E follows O through an alley up the stairs of a block of flats to a room, while O tries to escape every form of extraneous perception, including a mirror, a parrot, a goldfish, the staring eyes on a print of a deity, a cat and a dog, and two eye-shaped holes on the wall and on the rocking chair. O goes around covering the mirror, the cage and the bowl where the parrot and the fish were, and removing the print from the wall. In the process we get a rather long vaudevillian sequence with the cat and the dog, where O tries to get rid of the animals by taking them out of the room, one at a time, but when he opens the door to put one of them outside, the other gets in. Quintessential Keaton. O also

Figure 7 – O scrutinised

[15] Innovation came both in the form of concept and technique. According to Martin Esslin (1983), the experiments with sound that were carried out by the BBC's Third Programme in late 1956 for the production of *All That Fall* "led directly to the establishment of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop" (129). Thus, the discoveries made in the pocess of stylising the realistic sounds that the play called for "directly contributed to one of the most important technical advances in the art of radio (and the technique, and indeed technology, of radio in Britain)" (129).

destroys old photographs before E finally manages to corner O and enter *percipi*, that is, an angle where O experiences "anguish of perceivedness" (*CSP*, 164). Before this, E has been perceiving O from behind, not exceeding and angle of 45º - the "angle of immunity" (*CSP*, 164). In the end it becomes clear that "pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self" (*CSP*, 163).

The *Beckett on Film* project is all about wanting to be perceived. Wanting to be perceived as a cultural item, as a trendy superstar project, as a canon. When it came to advertising the project, Channel 4 brandished the names of the celebrities involved in it like a stand. This is an excerpt from a press release:

> *Beckett on Film* is a unique project. For the first time, all 19 plays by Samuel Beckett, the novelist and playwright who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, have been filmed. (…) [The films] bring together some of the world's most distinguished directors – Anthony Minghella, Neil Jordan, Atom Egoyan, Karel Reisz, Patricia Rozema, Richard Eyre and David Mamet – and talented actors – the late John Gielgud, playwright Harold Pinter, Jeremy Irons, John Hurt, Michael Gambon, Alan Rickman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Juliet Stephenson and Julianne Moore. (quoted in SIERZ, 137-138)

For all the big names, the cost of the project was only about £4.5 million ($6 million). Actors and directors worked for nominal fees. Most were just very pleased they could be a part of such a project. Many of the participants are Beckett fans and claim him as a major influence in their work. Such is the case of Anthony Minghella, Atom Egoyan and Neil

Figure 8 – DVD box set cover of *Beckett on Film*

Jordan. Others had either directed or acted in plays by Beckett before and were keen on being a part of the 'definite Beckett'. Some directors brought actors they had worked with in previous films. Kristin Scott-Thomas, Juliet Stevenson and Alan Rickman had all starred in films directed by Anthony Minghella before – *The English Patient* (1996) and Truly, *Madly, Deeply* (1991) respectively, Julianne Moore had been in Neil Jordan's *The End of the Affair* (1999) and Charles Sturridge had co-directed (with Michael Lindsay, who directed *Waiting For Godot* for *Beckett on Film*) Jeremy Irons in *Brideshead Revisited* (1981).

In its emphasis on the figure of the director, *Beckett on Film* is the product of a trend in post-1960s theatre in which the director's name takes up a prominent role on the marquee; the same trend that saw the reinterpretation of classic works of the stage with the director as co-author with the writer, and obviously a trend that drew its inspiration from the film auteur movement of the 1950s.

The origins of *Beckett on Film* can be traced back to a Beckett festival which took place in Dublin, in 1991, and was directed by Michael Colgan. At the time, the Gate Theatre put up 19 plays[16] by Samuel Beckett (all that he has written, except for *Eleutheria*) and a few radio plays. A very similar version of this festival travelled to the Lincoln Center Festival in New York in 1996, and one year later, five of those plays were shown in Melbourne at a mini-festival. In September 2000, the whole 19 plays as well as extensive readings of poetry and prose were presented at the Barbican Centre, in London. As a

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[16] These were, in alphabetical order, *Act Without Words I* (1956), *Act Without Words II* (1956), *Breath* (1969), *Catastrophe* (1982), *Come and Go* (1965), *Endgame* (1957), *Footfalls* (1976), *Happy Days* (1960), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Not I* (1972), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), *Play* (1963), *Rockaby* (1980), *Rough for the Theatre I* (late 1950s), *Rough for the Theatre II* (late 1950s), *That Time* (1975), *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *What Where* (1983).

consequence of the success of these performances, Colgan started making contacts to film the plays. Together with Alan Moloney (executive producer of *Amongst Women* (1998)), he set up a company in 1998, Blue Angel Films, with the intent of filming all of Beckett's plays, and as word spread around, the project started to gain support and prestige, even before it was actually started. Stories are told of how directors, on hearing about the project, ran to secure participation in it. *Beckett on Film* was shot for RTÉ, Channel 4, Tyrone Productions and the Irish Film Board and all 19 films were produced by Colgan and Moloney.[17] The following is a list of the films, their directors and the actors who participated in them, in the order in which they were shot:

- *What Where* (12 min.) dir. Damien O'Donnell, with Sean McGinley and Gary Lewis; shot in December 1999
- *Endgame* (84 min.) dir. Conor McPherson, with Michael Gambon, David Thewlis, Charles Simon and Jean Anderson; shot in February 2000
- *Breath* (45 sec.) dir. Damien Hirst, with Keith Allen (voice); shot in february 2000
- *Not I* (15 min.) dir. Neil Jordan, with Julianne Moore; shot in February 2000
- *Catastrophe* (16 min.) dir. David Mamet, with Harold Pinter, Rebecca Pigeon and John Geilgud; shot in March 2000
- *Footfalls* (27 min.) dir. Walter Asmus, with Susan Fitzgerald, Joan O'Hara; shot in April 2000
- *Act Without Words I* (22 min.) dir. Karel Reisz, with John Foley and music by Michael Nyman; shot in April 2000

[17] The relationships established with *Beckett on Film* have proved to be profitable for Moloney who, since the project has produced films by two directors involved in it: John Crowley's *Intermission* (2003) and Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005).

- *Krapp's Last Tape* (55 min.) dir. Atom Egoyan, with John Hurt; shot in April 2000
- *A Piece of Monologue* (27 min.) dir. Robin Lefevre, with Stephen Brennan; shot in May 2000
- *Play* (20 min.) dir. Anthony Minghella, with Juliet Stevenson, Kirstin Scott Thomas and Alan Rickman; shot in May 2000
- *Ohio Impromptu* (15 min.) dir. Charles Sturridge, with Jeremy Irons; shot in June 2000
- *Rockaby* (16 min.) dir. Richard Eyre, with Penelope Wilton; shot in June 2000
- *Act Without Words II* (9 min.) dir. Enda Hughes, with Marcello Magni and Pat Kinevane; shot in June 2000
- *Rough for Theatre I* (18 min.) dir. Kieron J. Walsh, with David Kelly and Milo O'Shea; shot in June 2000
- *Rough for Theatre II* (35 min.) dir. Katie Mitchell, with Timothy Spall, Jim Norton and Hugh O'Brien; shot in June 2000
- *Happy Days* (102 min.) dir. Patricia Rozema, with Rosaleen Linehan and Richard Johnson; shot in June 2000
- *Waiting for Godot* (132 min.) dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg, with Barry McGovern, Johnny Murphy, Stephen Brennen and Alan Stanford; shot in November 2000
- *That Time* (15 min.) dir. Charles Garrad, with Niall Buggy; shot in December 2000
- *Come and Go* (6 min.) dir. John Crowley, with Paola Dionisotti, Anna Massey and Sian Phillips; shot in December 2000

The names listed above represent another point of departure between *Film* and *Beckett on Film*. The former was driven by enthusiasts and the later by professionals. Although both Beckett and Schneider were very interested and knowledgeable of film as an art form, they lacked the practical and indeed technical knowledge to work with the medium. As a consequence of that inexperience, they had to do away

with most of the outdoor sequence at the beginning of *Film*, the product of the first day of shooting. There were problems with lighting and the camera was unsteady throughout. Budget restrictions didn't allow the sequence to be reshot and only the slightly better scenes with Keaton running alongside a wall and getting into the building were used. Also, on seeing *Film*, one has to agree with Hugh Kenner when he says that

> the crucial distinction between the two kinds of images – the protagonist's perception of the room, the camera's perception of him perceiving – was insufficiently emphatic to be recognized at once as a convention. The de-focused images that stand for his perception seem at first like slight mistakes (Kenner, 169)

Again, a consequence of a limited budget and tight schedules as much as lack of experience on the part of its makers.

In "On Directing Samuel Beckett's *Film*", written in 1969, Alan Schneider bitterly complained about the reception *Film* got – or didn't get – when it was released:

> [w]e had difficulty marketing the film. No one wanted it. No one wants shorts anyhow, and this one they didn't want (or understand) with a vengeance. Nor did showing it around help us. We stopped showing it. It became a lone, very lone, piece indeed. Which no one ever saw, and seemingly very few wanted to see. (http://www.ubu.com/papers/beckett_schneider.html)

Film eventually got some recognition and critical attention as well as favourable reviews, being shown at several European film festivals and

winning a few prizes, but it still remains a relatively obscure reference in the sphere of film studies.

Neither the big names and their expertise nor the attempt to establish *Beckett on Film* as an Irish cultural item were enough to guarantee the project proper broadcasting time. Still according to Sierz, the screening history of the project was less than satisfactory. In Ireland, in March-April 2001, the project was broadcast over a period of two to three weeks, but in Britain, Channel 4 only showed six of the 19 films – *Breath*, *Catastrophe*, *Not I*, *Play*, *Rockaby* and *Waiting for Godot* – sometime in mid-2001. Although the screening of the project was somewhat erratic, at the time when this study was being done, Channel 4 had come up with a good use for *Beckett on Film*. Channel 4's 4Learning programme at http://web.channel4.com / learning / main / netnotes // sersecid551.htm, includes 17 plays of *Beckett on Film* – all except *Rockaby* and *Rough for Theatre II*. Each play is properly situated according to Curriculum Relevance. In addition, a "Programme Outline" is provided, as well as useful "Links" to information related to the play and "Background", which includes sub-categories such as "Director", "Cast", "Setting", "Theme", "Structure" and "Character". *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot* also include "Close Reading 1" and "Close Reading 2" and suggested "Activities".[18] All in all it is a useful tool for studying the work of one of the greatest

[18] Education seems to be the fate of public art. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shakespeare's plays were recorded for BBC/Time-Life Television in a similar project to that of *Beckett on Film*. Like *Beckett on Film* it had had to find a balance between presenting itself as British (to make it relevant at home) and yet of international importance (to attract funds other than the BBC's). Also like *Beckett on Film*, it offended purists, worried some critics and was praised for being a nationalist venture by others. With time, the Shakespeare project began to look dated, and as new interpreters came up with new adaptations, the whole thing was handed over from BBC drama to BBC education.

writers of the 20th century, but it makes the mistake of mostly trying to read the pieces as plays rather than films, which is what they are.

In "'A Relevant and Cinematic Environment': Filming Beckett's Plays", Aleks Sierz discusses the advantages of having film versions of plays rather than filmed plays. According to him,

> a live event is defined by the experience of being there: in the deepest sense it is experiential, and video recordings only manage to suggest that liveness from the sidelines, where it looks rough, inert, distant, artificial, awkward – lost in translation. The results of filming live events are often perceived as profoundly disappointing. By contrast, an individual's shared memory of the event captures something of the unique relationship between stage and audience (141).

This comment echoes the point Walter Benjamin makes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that the presence in time and space of an original work of art distinguishes it from its reproductions. Beckett understood the limitations of filmed plays and was an avid explorer of different mediums. The television version of *What Where*, made in Beckett's lifetime under his supervision, took into account the differences of the medium.

Besides the obvious advantage of having cinematic versions of the plays, that has already been mentioned, the Beckett estate, run by Samuel Beckett's executor and nephew Edward Beckett, must have seen in *Beckett on Film* an opportunity to leave behind a product which is definite – or at least, more definite than any play production. But more importantly, a permanently fixed product which was conducted by people who had met and even worked with Beckett in his lifetime. People who

had worked under his supervision, who understood his vision and were willing to comply with the demands of the estate. These demands were mostly in the sense of inflexible faithfulness to the text, something Beckett tried very hard to make all stagings of his work stick to throughout his life, occasionally fighting more eccentric productions by means of lawsuits.

In an interview with Alan Riding, which appeared in the *New York Times* on 11 June 2000, Michael Colgan explained that

> [w]e worked out a bible to give the directors. (...) No cuts, no gender-bending, and if Beckett says 'beach' there should be a beach. We didn't want adaptations or 'inspired by' stuff. We needed directors with a sense of the importance of the text. That's why we sought out writer-directors. We let them choose their own casts, but this project is not actor-led, it is director-led. (www.beckettonfilm.com/colgan_interview.html)

And this directive was indeed followed by everybody. Innovation was sought by directors through conventional filming techniques and camera effects such as zooms, close-ups and fast cutting that are not available to theatre performances. In some cases these produce significant changes that can even effect one's interpretation of the plays as much as corruptions of the text would have. This issue will be taken up in detail in the next chapters, but for now it is important to acknowledge at least the potential for an enriching contribution that the new approaches in *Beckett on Film* can offer.

Something else the *Beckett on Film* project offered was another opportunity for Ireland to claim Beckett as an Irish writer. Although he was Irish, his work is better contextualised as part of a wider European tradition of existentialist post-war writing than as specifically Irish

literature. Those who tend to include him in the second category explain it based on his (thin) use of linguistic regionalisms, and reference to place names. In "Beckett's bilingualism", Ann Beer points out how difficult it is to place Beckett in any one national context:

> [h]e may be seen in many ways as a European, working in his late years in the era of Derrida, Foucault and Barthes. Yet he can be claimed with equal force as a master of the Irish tradition, inheritor of the mantle of Joyce, Yeates and Synge (PILLING, 219).

The Irishness of Beckett's work may be debatable, but that of the *Beckett on Film* project is not. The project is very strongly articulated by its creators in terms of its Irishness most likely motivated by a mixture of nationalism, a perceived Irish legacy in Beckett's work and even with institutional support (in the form of funding) in view. Deliberate attempts were made in this direction:

> [i]n several films where the movie directors are not Irish, a sense of place is provided by well-known Irish actors: Sean Foley in *Act Without Words I*, directed by Karel Reisz; Rosaleen Linehan in *Happy Days*, directed by Patricia Rozema; Sean McGinley and Gary Lewis in *What Where*, directed by Damien O'Donnell; and Susan Fitzgerald and Jane O'Hara in *Footfalls* and Johnny Murphy and Barry McGovern in *Waiting for Godot*, both directed by Walter Asmus [sic].[19]

[19] The *Beckett on Film* website got it wrong – Michael Lindsay-Hogg directed *Waiting for Godot*, not Walter Asmus.

(www.beckettonfilm.com/colgan_interview.html)

The radio play *All That Fall* (1956) has been pointed out as being Beckett's most Irish piece of writing. This was the first time Beckett had written in English since the completion of *Watt*, in 1945. The main character, Maddy Rooney, has a distinctive Irish way of speaking, using phrases and expressions that are unmistakably Irish. The references to the landscape seem to point towards an Irish setting. A. Alvarez says the play "has links with the mannered world of Irish character [Beckett] had already left behind him" (Alvarez, 112). And there seems to be an emigrant's comment on the part of Beckett in Mrs Rooney's words "It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home(…)? A lingering dissolution" (*CSP*, 15).

Maybe it was a lingering dissolution Beckett was trying to avoid when he decided to leave his native country. One can hardly ignore the fact that he chose to live in a country other than Ireland for most of his life. Including during the 2nd World War, when he and his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil had to live in hiding for over two years in occupied France because they were members of the *resistance*. Although their lives were in danger, they chose to remain in France, when they could have gone back to neutral Ireland at any stage. In his life as in his work he left Ireland behind. Thus Patrick Duffy's remark in "Literary Reflections on Irish Migration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" that Beckett, like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, "quietly merged into [his] host society without a backward glance" (20).[20] Ackerley and Gontarski are more firm on this matter:

> Ireland is absent or disappears from Beckett's work (…) it exists as an afterthought, an aura, which is a

[20] Unlike James Joyce, Sean O'Casey and Edna O'Brien, who "had notable reactions to the society from which they came" (DUFFY, 20).

> specter with its subject gone. Despite his Irish roots and recent attempts of countrymen to recolonize him, Beckett was a consumate European, more comfortable in the intellectual milieu of Europe than that of his native “prosodoturfy” (xv).

Reportedly, in an interview with Lawrence Harvey, Beckett “suggested that perhaps it was an Irish trait to be sceptical both of the natural world as given and of the perceiving subject as well” (Graver, 7). Michael Colgan finds the humour in Beckett’s work unmistakably Irish. Others try to find other features – and succeed in doing so - that will ground him to that particular place. But how does one measure “Irishness” or any national trait for that matter, if it is not explicitly stated? Writers, like everybody else, are permeable to foreign influences. Beckett all the more so due to biographic circumstances as well as wide reading and involvement in cultural and artistic debates. And what is the importance of claiming an author as a national icon, apart from appeasing the human drive to categorise and label everything and everyone around us? Perhaps the usefulness of such an exercise is best seen in the light of national identities. Historical circumstances have meant that Ireland has had to construct a national identity radically different to others that were geographically very close; it has had to legitimise its political independence in terms of people, culture, legacy and land by creating strong bonds based on unmistakable shared characteristics that feed into the idea of nation. In the process, Ireland has been successful in establishing itself and trying to sell itself as a country of culture to which names like Joyce, Yeates and alas, Beckett have contributed greatly. In this light, it is scarcely surprising that a *Beckett on Film* project that involved Radio Telefís Éireann made a point of stressing its resonance in Beckett’s work. Scholarship, however, tends rather to play down this aspect in favour of less nationalistically

philosophical or aesthetic issues, and it is to these I will now turn my attention.

THE DRAMATIC BODY

Am I as much as – being seen?
- Samuel Beckett, *Play*

And to think all that is organic waste!
- Samuel Beckett, *Rough for Theatre II*

The Absurd, as explicated by Martin Esslin, is not only a set of philosophical beliefs, it is also a specific type of discourse (mostly nonsensical) and an aesthetic mood, which in Beckett, more than in anyone else, took the shape of an aesthetics of bareness. He insisted on the undecorated nature of performance because he believed that everything that appeared on stage had to have a purpose or a meaning, and this has sometimes earned Beckett's plays the description of "bleak". *Waiting for Godot* was a turning point in the history of modern theatre, but it was also just a starting point for Beckett, whose plays became more and more schematic, minimalistic and symbolic, as well as shorter, in a fashion that is suggestive of the dramatic subtraction that he operated on the stage. In this process, the bodies of his characters have more often than not also been diminished, reduced to a symbolical minimum. An exploration of the grammar of the body in Beckett's work will help shed some light on how physical defects and

infirmities, immobilization and restriction in space, uncomfortable body positions and disembodiment function as metaphors for landscapes of the mind.

After having established, in the introduction, that the Absurd is grounded in Existentialist philosophy, it is perhaps useful to look at how the Existentialists have interpreted the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty drew up a theory of perception as a form of embodied experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is an intersensory system which functions as a common ground for the unification of the senses. In *Dictionary of Existentialism*, Constance L. Mui explains this unity in terms of the perception of a rose:

> One could analyse the perceptual act by breaking it down into sight, smell, and touch, each giving a mode of access to the rose. But these divisions do not emerge in my encounter with the rose. The rose is a red, fragrant, and prickly object that I experience all at once, prior to any objective thematization. While I encounter the object, I do not experience my senses as divided but as simultaneously referring to one another. Each sense implicates my entire body. (52)

Asserting that the perception of the world is conditioned by one's body necessarily implies that one's bodiliness affects relationships with space, objects and with other beings. Furthermore, in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Cognition and the Human Brain*, António Damásio argues against the traditional division between mind and body by establishing that emotions are a direct translation of body states and that rationality is dependent upon emotion and feeling. According to Damásio and other neurologists, rationality originates in the mechanisms of bodily systems themselves.

Within Existentialism, the body is regarded as being completely intertwined with consciousness, and is not to be reduced to a mere object for consciousness. This is in tune with Mark L. Johnson's argument in "Embodied Reason":

> No matter how sophisticated our abstractions become, if they are to be meaningful to us, they must retain their intimate ties to our embodied modes of conceptualisation and reasoning. We can only experience what our embodiment allows us to experience. We can only conceptualize using conceptual systems grounded in our bodily experience. And we can only reason by means of our embodied, imaginative rationality. (81)

By arguing that reasoning develops from bodily activities and that thought is structured through basic bodily functions, Johnson is licensing an interpretation of the physical build of Beckett's characters, their abilities and disabilities, as determinant factors in their psychological characterization.

Beckett insisted on undermining the notion of the body as a given, as a stable concept. As a writer of the vanguard, he was a predecessor of a new trend both in art and in cultural theory. His plays constitute an early symptom of the modern obsession with human isolation, the idea that one is helplessly alone, that everything else is untrustworthy, but the body is a legitimate source of knowledge, that truth arises from the body. The 1960s and 1970s saw this contemporary concern with the body translated into new art forms in western culture. Movements such as Body Art and Performance Art bloomed with the awareness that the body is a cultural, social and political construct. Since then, "the body as canvas" (and notoriously, so the artist's body) has been a central theme and discourse in art production. Cindy Sherman is one of the most recognisable names associated with this trend. At the time, Sherman was

particularly interested in drawing attention to the cultural discourses and images in which women were traditionally represented, and she did it by means of photographing herself (the artist as model) in ways that parodied those representations. Her photographs had an element of hyper-ugliness, in her own words, which was achieved mostly with recourse to the subversion of the blueprints of femininity: beauty, motherhood, domesticity, sensuality. And although in recent years Sherman has moved away from using her own body in her work, the body is still her object, but it is increasingly an artificial body, using mannequins and prosthesis for the most part. The body as artistic material is also the focus of the work of Marina Abramovic. In performances which consisted of running and crashing against a wall until exhaustion or driving a knife between her fingers as fast as she could, and inevitably injuring herself in the process, Abramovic sought to test the limits of the body by subjecting it to states of physical and mental pain, a process which is not too far from that which Beckett subjected his characters and actors to.

That which is inscribed on the bodies of Beckett's characters can be summed up in Rodney Sappington's views of the body as "a site of physical and psychological trauma, institutional control, and enforced sexual norms and practices" (11). And although the sexual and institutional are not always obviously visible in the Beckettian body, the idea of repression and restriction is certainly of the utmost relevance to its being-in-the-world as well as its being-on-stage. In his article "The Body in Beckett's Theatre", Pierre Chabert acknowledges that "as in life, so in Beckett's drama, one's body exists all the more strongly when it begins to suffer" (*Journal of Beckett Studies* n.º 8 Autumn 1982).[21] And does the body suffer in Beckett's drama! Most of the time it is difficult to determine whether the psychological tension in which his characters

[21] References to articles in the *Journal of Beckett Studies* come from the online edition at http://english.fsu.edu/jobs/default.cfm; there is no indication of page number because none is provided.

exist results from their status as physically diminished, or if it is the other way around, that they are physically diminished as a metaphor for the psychological strain they are in. Whichever the case, this diminishment is achieved through different processes. Physical defects and/or infirmities, immobilization, extreme body positions, restriction in space, fragmented visibility, disembodiment, lack of memory, old age, and objectification of the body, all are strategies systematically used by Beckett to challenge conventional notions of normality. *Endgame* (1958) illustrates this point very clearly: Hamm can't stand up, Clov can't sit down, Hamm is blind, his parents, Nagg and Nell, are legless.

A parallel can be drawn between the subtraction Beckett operated on the stage over the years and the creation process of *Endgame*. In its original French, *Fin de Partie* started off as a long two-act manuscript in April 1956, with a great deal of stage frenzy and a large number of props. In this first draft, the characters were constantly moving and language seemed to be overtaken by action, very much the contrary of what a Beckett play is usually like. However, he was unhappy with this version and continued working on it until June 1956, when it emerged as a long single-act play, which was finally to his taste.

Precision and economy are the most important of Beckett's stylistic values, and these were sometimes difficult to achieve. In a letter to Thomas McGreevy on March 3 1957, Beckett expressed his disappointment at the English translation of *Fin de Partie*: "I find it loses power in English, all the sharpness gone, and the rhythms. If I were not bound by contract to the Royal Court Theatre, I wouldn't allow it in English at all" (BAIR, 479). Beckett felt his play lost a certain roughness and rawness that the French language lent itself to, and he couldn't find the same tone in English. The evocative title was one of the sources of discontent, because in English it refers specifically to chess whereas in the French original it can refer to any game.[22]

[22] Translation occupied a great deal of Beckett's time. For the staging of his plays to work as he wanted them to, it was very important that the text said

In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin suggests an interpretation of *Endgame* as a play taking place inside a human head, where the characters are part of a whole personality. He says the characters "might well represent different aspects of a single personality, repressed memories in the subconscious mind [Nell and Nagg] the emotional [Hamm] and the intellectual [Clov] selves" (66). If there is some truth in this analysis, this is yet another way Beckett has found to split the body. Following this line of thought, Esslin asks of the play: "Is the death of the outside world the gradual receding of the links to reality that takes place in the process of ageing and dying? Is *Endgame* a monodrama depicting the dissolution of a personality in the hour of death?" (66) It might well be, for in *Endgame*, as in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Not I* (1972) and *That Time* (1975), among others, ageing appears as yet another sign of physical diminishment, of the deterioration of the body and, inevitably, of the mind.

Conor McPherson (*Saltwater, The Actors*), who directed *Endgame* for the *Beckett on Film* project, decided to emphasise the comical aspect of the play. This has resulted in a lively version of *Endgame*, one where the pauses are not too long and the actors seem to feed each other lines as in a vaudevillian act. This effect is partially achieved due to the fact that, in film, actors do not have to project their voices as they do in the theatre, so they can speak faster and reduce the pauses. From www.beckettonfilm.com one learns that McPherson hopes "the film will demystify Beckett's reputation for being hard going" and adds "I just wanted to make sure it was funny, because, if it was funny, it could be

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exactly what Beckett wanted it to say. Because he usually translated his plays after they had already been performed, the new versions could benefit from adjustments according to what worked and what did not work on stage. Such was the case with *En Attendant Godot* which unsurprisingly became more focused (some expressions were explained), more precise (eg. the English version indicates the exact number of leaves on the tree) and shorter (four passages are cut).

understood". This is a bit of an unfortunate comment on the part of McPherson, who may only be reproducing a directive that governed the project, but nonetheless it reflects the generally patronising attitude of comercial cinema towards its audience, which does not seem to be appropriate here.

Unsurprisingly, there is no resolution to *Endgame*. Because it does not really tell a story, but rather explores a situation (much like *Waiting for Godot*), the whole of the dramatic tension in this play rests on the possibility of Clov gathering enough courage to leave Hamm, and thus provoking both their deaths. But as in *Waiting for Godot*, no final action is taken, and the audience is left with the feeling that all that happened on stage will take place endlessly, and has probably happened before as well. Besides being a poignant comment on life and routine, this is also an appropriate metaphor for the theatre, with its daily repetition of performances.

The similarities between *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* do not stop here though. In both plays there is a use of symmetrical pairs – Clov and Hamm, Nell and Nagg, Didi and Gogo – which is also a way of dividing characteristics of wholeness. Characters become complementary to each other, representing different parts of a unity. There are other such twosomes in Beckett's work: in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp at 39 and Krapp at 69; or Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days*. Ackerley and Gontarski call them "pseudocouples" in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (463). According to them:

> [o]ne might read SB's pairs as pseudocouples not because the characters are one and the same but, on a more literal level, because they are, as human beings, isolated and unable to overcome the distance that separates them (465).

Rough for Theatre I illustrates their point very well: ‘A’ is a blindman and ‘B’, a man who is bound to a wheelchair. They could help each other and make life a little easier, B actually suggests it at one stage, but when the play ends, they are attacking each other fiercely, the chance for collaboration and, in a way, wholeness, dashed. Dysfunctionality is thus portrayed as the impossibility to bridge the gap between two separate, but complimentary, beings.

In *Happy Days*, Winnie’s body gradually disappears during the play (figues 9 and 10), whereas Willie is barely visible throughout, and he only shows up when Winnie is almost completely buried. He is silent and she suffers from logorrhoea. Winnie is aware of her physical situation, but does not seem to realise how absurd it is. Her discourse is a way of denying her fate (to be completely swallowed up by the ground). She is cheerful for the most part, and tries to project an image of herself as an educated and decent woman. As A. Alvarez put it, “she is the opposite of all those chronic complainers on whom Beckett elsewhere lavishes so much sympathy” (109). However, that doesn’t do her any good, for still according to Alvarez, through Winnie, Beckett is saying “blessed are the optimists, for they shall be buried alive” (111).

Figures 9 and 10 – Buried alive

It has been suggested by several critics that Winnie’s condition progresses in terms of her annullment as a sexual being (buried up to her waist first, finishing with only her head left). Her body is thus replaced with objects that are dear to her and which acquire more importance as

the play develops, and also, because Winnie is buried, there is space for Willie to appear, in a reverse movement to that of the visibility of her body. Can this be a comment on marriage? Patricia Rozema's film version of the play is shot in very bright colours, which seems to emphasise the sense of artificiality and futility that Winnie's speech demonstrates, especially when put in context. The almost nonexistent camera movement and the very few cuts made to this film are effective in conveying the inertia and immobility that the text calls for, in an interpretation of the monotony of domestic life.

Waiting for Godot is a play that asks "why are we here?" (on stage and in the world) but Deirdre Bair, Beckett's first biographer, notes that after writing *Play* (1964), he began a "new kind of writing":

> [h]e was no longer concerned with a peripatetic being compelled to wander on a relentless search for the self. From this point on, the hero (or being, or voice – all are applicable terms) is usually fixed, concentrating at various times on a past world (usually fluid), a present world (usually confined) and a future world (usually horrible to contemplate because of its infinite fixed horror) (577-578).

The alienation from physicality (due to immobility or physical defects) seems to be overcompensated for by a verbal incontinence (never eloquence). As they can't move, all that Beckett's characters can do is speak away. It is the only sort of action they can take both because they are physically incapable of any other action, and because every action is meaningless and useless anyway.

When Chabert wrote "the bodies of Beckett's characters always exist in a state of lack or negativity: unable to be seen, or to move, or to see or to hear", he was referring to the fact that Beckett's characters are sometimes only partially visible, and more often than not deprived of

basic faculties such as movement. Willie is only partly seen for most of *Happy Days,* and the same happens to Winnie. In *That Time,* a spotlight shows Listener's face while the rest of his body is eroded by shadows. In *Play*, the light is concentrated on the character's heads, not to mention the fact that the rest of their bodies are encased in urns. *Catastrophe* (1981) shows this process of anulling the body progressively, by narrowing the visibility of Protagonist until all one can see is his head, "our catastrophe" (*CSP,* 300), in Director's words. *Not I* (1972) goes one step further than all these plays by the concentration on just one part of the body – the mouth.

There is an element of the uncanny and the grotesque in disembodiment, and that is provoked by the sight of bodily organs out of their natural place, that is, apart from the rest of the body. Julia Kristeva called it abjection, and explained its power in relation with the need to protect one's body against what is alien to it and thus potentially harmful.

Krapp's tapes play a disembodied voice. Krapp mocks his younger self, creating a gap between what become two different characters – himself at different ages. *That Time* is another example of a disembodied voice, this time split into three. Listener, the character, stands in the middle of the stage during the play and, as his name suggests, listens to three voices, A, B and C, which are all his own, coming to him from both sides and above. The only movements he makes are opening and closing his eyes, breathing, and, at the end, smiling. The voices speak of different times in his life.

The very fact that the character is called "Listener" invokes some kind of lack, absence or split, for in communication one is never only a listener; also, it implies that there is a "speaker", which we find out, is himself, times three. Ultimately, this play is saying that there is no possible channel for communication because there is no one listening, because "listener" is actually "speaker". There is a lot of talking in Beckett, but there is absolutely no listening going on. *Not I* appears as an extreme case of the exploration of the relationship between the body

and words. In this play, the body is reduced to the place where words are articulated: the mouth.

Acting in a Beckett play, particularly when directed by him, was bound to be a physical ordeal, and a parallel can be drawn between the actors' experience and the strain his characters seem to be in all the time. Billie Whitelaw, who had previously worked with Beckett in *Play*, did not give the premier performance of *Not I*, which was staged with Jessica Tandy, but it was her Beckett had in mind when he wrote the play, and she eventually performed it, in a production under his supervision. Deirdre Bair's account of the rehearsals and preparations for that performance reveal a tortuous process in which Beckett demanded extreme concentration and accuracy on the part of Whitelaw, urging her to repeat her lines to perfection and taking her to the edge of breaking point. In an interview with James Knowlson on 1 February 1977, Billie Whitelaw said about playing Mouth in *Not I*:

> I had to go through certain barriers that were painful. For instance, there is no time to breathe; the rib cage is pounding and pounding, and it becomes unbearably painful; going at that speed and trying to draw tiny little breaths, I would go dizzy; I would fall over at rehearsals; my jaw felt as though it had full Army kit on. (…) The jaw would not open and shut. (*Journal Of Beckett Studies* n.º 3 Summer 1978)

Whitelaw performed strapped to the high back of a chair, holding onto a bar in front of her (because she concentrated so much tension and strength in her arms and shoulders and she often fell on her face during rehearsals). She would hold on to the bar so hard during performances that she would rub off the skin of her palms.

In another production, directed by Francis Warner, a different solution for the staging of *Not I* was devised. The actress, Rosemary

Pountney, sat six feet up on a scaffolding structure, which was covered in a black fabric, and had a small hole cut on it for the mouth to be visible. A piece of black material tied to the actress's head and neck held her in position. This strategy was adopted because the original black hood Pountney was supposed to wear was found to be unbearably hot and uncomfortable.

Not I is possibly the most visually disconcerting of Beckett's plays. The alienation between the self and body which the text talks about echoes the visual experience that watching that stream of consciousness pouring through Mouth has on an audience. The theatrical image of a mouth - a disembodied mouth, more to the point - generates unease. According to Steven Connor in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*,

> [o]ne of the most disturbing things about using a mouth to represent the body is that it contradicts habitual metaphors of the body as somehow projective, convex, solid, and 'full'. In *Not I*, the mouth is both a presence, and an enclosing absence. (162)

Beckett kept every stage of his plays under strict control, from writing to translating to producing and directing. But drama is probably the most difficult of genres to work with for someone who will not allow intrusion, because of the number of people who are necessarily involved allied to the inherent mutability of performances played live over a varying length of time. This was a source of anxiety and agony for Beckett, who spent the best part of his creative life translating his own work and supervising productions of his plays, making sure everything was exactly as he wanted things to be. Striving but not always succeeding.

However, Whitelaw seems to preserve good memories of working with Beckett, she has said about working with him, and particularly about his characteristics as a director:

> Compassion; a general love of his fellow human-beings; the feeling that he very much wants you to get it right; he will not let you go out and give a sterile performance — this is marvellously comforting. (*Journal of Beckett Studies* n.º3 Summer 1978)

Beckett had a clear idea of what his work should be and he found that all productions that were not under his supervision suffered from excess "theatricality" (the dirtiest word in Beckett's vocabulary). He often encountered technical difficulties that stood in the way of his vision. For instance, the figure of the Auditor in *Not I* had to be dropped because its visibility compromised the image of the mouth.

Neil Jordan's version of the play for the *Beckett on Film* outrageously dismisses all of Beckett's directives, which may be the price to pay for having Hollywood superstar Julianne Moore playing Mouth. Mesmerising as her mouth is, it did not prove to be attractive enough to show it disembodied. As a result, one gets to see Mouth, which is a whole woman,

Figure 11 – Mouth's body in *Beckett on Film*

sitting on a chair before the speech starts. And if that wasn't enough, Moore's whole face is in the picture on the DVD box set and in the promotional image on the project's

website (figure 11), as if that image represented the play, where there should only be a mouth. It is a bit of a puzzle that the Beckett estate has agreed to this, not living up to its reputation of strictness towards Beckett's will.

Beckett's characters don't move much on stage, so even when they are not actually physically deprived of movement, which they often are, it can feel as though they can't walk, gesture or even blink. Immobility is effective in introducing force and dramatic tension in the plays. This economy of movement results in a concentration of gesture, so that the smallest move is noticeable and meaningful. *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* are perhaps the exception to this. In these plays movement becomes a central aspect. In *Rockaby*, W rocks back and forth in her mother's rocking chair as she reminisces about her at the same time as she reenacts the story she is telling; in *Footfalls*, May paces back and forth talking about her life and listening to her mother's voice doing the same thing. In both plays movement is mechanical, repetitive, rhythmic, precise and incessant. As we learn from the stories told in *Rockaby* and *Footfalls*, these women do not have lives of their own, their lives are inseparable from their mothers' lives, and it is as if these characters' existence is only validated through movement, because movement is the only thing they do themselves and for themselves. This issue will be taken up and further developed in the chapter about repetition and symmetry, but the point that calls for attention now is that of May's corporality. The same way as her self is dissolved so is her body; her pacing, her posture and her attire are designed to give her a ghostly appearance, her body reduced to a state of immateriality (figure 12).

Figure 12 - Billie Whitelaw as May at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1976, directed by Beckett

As well as depriving it of solidity, Beckett also tries to objectify the body, deny it humanity. Krapp is hard of hearing (as well as nearsighted and spectacleless), so he leans on the tape-recorder, encompassing it, making it a part of his body in what is perhaps another move

towards the objectification of the Beckettian body. Another possible reading is that the tape-recorder functions as prosthesis, as an extension of the body (voice, memory), an artificial one, because the body is insufficient as well as not self-sufficient. The same happens in *Play*, where according to the indications in the text, the characters are supposed to be merged with the urns, their make up is done in a way that they resemble the object, are part of it. The fact that Beckett gave up on giving names to his characters in his later plays and reduced them to their function (listener, reader), gender (M, W1, W2), body part (mouth), or simply as A, B or C is another move towards the annulment of the self and the objectification of the body.

There is also the comic aspect of Beckett's plays to consider. Esslin tells us that "[t]he Theatre of the Absurd is based on the assumption that human life and endeavour are so essentially illogical, and language so inadequate as a means of communication, that human beings' only refuge is in laughter" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 26). Some of the situations are pathetic, but mostly they are pathetic because of the physical and psychological inadequacy of the characters. Thus, the laughter that is solicited from the audience is a sort of guilty laughter, uneasy because it springs from other people's helplessness and suffering. In *The Death of Comedy*, Erich Segal argues that Beckett is one of the "assassins of the genre [comedy]" because he denies his audience happy endings. He says of *Waiting for Godot* that it is "*anti*-comedy" (450), and furthermore, that "*Godot* marks the end of the life cycle of a genre – the death of comedy" (450). As it happens, *Waiting for Godot* is, more properly, a tragicomedy, as its English subtitle indicates, a genre which in John Orr's *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture: Play and Performance from Beckett to Shepard* is thus described:

> In its modern context it signals the final breakdown of the classical separation of high and low styles (…) Equally tragicamedy is a departure from the realist

> dramas of bourgeois conscience. It is, by contrast, a drama which is short, frail, explosive and bewildering. It balances comic repetition against tragic downfall. It demonstrates the coexistence of amusement and pity, terror and laughter. But it also deliniates a new dramatic form which, from Pirandello onwards, calls into question the conventions of the theatre itself. The modernist turn and the admixture of tragic and comic elements, the sudden switch from darkness to laughter, or vice-versa, come together in a twofold challenge. We are confronted with a world in which there appears to be little continuity of character or of action. We are never sure whether people or events referred to in dramatic speech have any objective validity. We never know as an audience how we are meant to identify physical landmarks or characters with peremptory names. Things just happen. Other things may never have happened at all (ORR, 1).

Orr's definition of tragicomedy actually encapsules a wide range of issues that are relevant to Beckett's writing and which are not strictly related to humour, namely its departure from "commited" drama. It can be said that his tragicomic vision of life shaped all his work, for as Ionesco points out, "[a]s the 'comic' is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more 'hopeless' [than tragedy], but in reality it lies outside the boundaries of hope or despair" (25).

Breath (1969), the shortest of Beckett's pieces, is directed by Damien Hirst in the *Beckett on Film* project. It consists of miscellaneous rubbish covering a wide surface and the sound of someone breathing in the background, flanked by two cries. Garbage, one can argue, is the remains of our lives, the remains of what we consume and which

becomes invisible (eg. through digestion) while its containers are left behind as evidence long after our bodies disappear. It is at once an index for development and a major problem for modern societies, which spend millions trying to process it.

Our perceptive modes tell us that if we are shown an image and there is a sound in the background, those two elements must in some way be connected. Over 80 years of talkies have done a good job in making that connection stronger. By showing waste, both organic and inorganic, and having a breathing sound, which is human and is emitted by a body, accompanying those images, one is naturally led to think there is some intent in establishing a meaningful connection between the two. That we are waste had already been suggested by Beckett in *Rough for Theatre II* (late 1950s) through one of the character's comments on birds: "Oh you pretty little pet, oh you bonny wee birdie! [*Pause. Glum.*] And to think all that is organic waste! All that splendour!" (*CSP*, 88). Can *Breath* be another variation on this theme?

Hirst is part of a generation known as Young British Artists (YBAs) who emerged from the art schools in the late 1980s. The YBAs sought to express their ideas about contemporary society by making art out of everyday objects and materials. This group is involved in a lot of controversy and divides critics who tend to either rave about the boldness and depth of the social critique of their artworks or to dismiss them as empty of meaning, objects that get by on their shock value. The polemics around the YBAs reached its peak when, in 1995, Hirst was awarded Britain's most high-profile art prize, the Turner Prize with *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away*, an art exhibition he curated and that included one of his emblematic pieces *Mother and Child, Divided* (1993), an installation (priced at £140,000) consisting of a cow and a calf in a formaldehyde solution, separated from each other, and separated themselves, that is, actually cut in half, longways. It is one step further from the fragmentation of the body that one is accustumed to witness in Beckett's drama. Where Beckett used lighting effects, body covering of

varying types and concentration on movement (or the lack of it) to convey mutilation of some sort, in his art Hirst mutilates to convey the vulnerability and the non-permanence of art, which is not so far from Beckett's discourse on life itself. Although *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), another one of Hirst's famous art works, consisting of a tiger shark in formaldehyde, does not sound like it could be the title of a Beckett piece for more than one reason, its principle seems to parallel that of *Breath*: that life is organic waste – Hirst's shark is decaying to a point where it smells and a fin has fallen off, which is exactly what would happen to Beckett's stage props in *Breath*, they would decompose even further until the stench was unbearable to an audience. But Beckett's characters are all too aware of death, unlike what Hirst seems to suggest with his title. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* suggests yet another point of departure between Beckett's and Hirst's work. In Channel 4's website there is a page dedicated to Hirst, http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/H/hirst.html, which includes "A Stuckist Critique of Damien Hirst" by the Stuckists (the self-proclaimed "first remodernist art group"). In this article, Billy Childish and Charles Thomson have the following to say about what they call Hirst's "pickled shark": "This purports to address a profound issue but renders its author not an artist but a cumbersome poet with a rather excessive visual aid." Where apparatus seems to be the key word in Hirst's work, in Beckett's it was very important to keep it to an absolute minimum and always subdued to meaning.

Figure 13 – No bodies where none intended

Hirst's rubbish is very sanitized though (figure 13), which is a surprise for those who are familiar with Hirst's taste for gore. It seems

to be mostly composed of medical waste, but again, of unused medical waste – there is no trace of blood or other indicators that might suggest actual contact with bodies, and this finds a curious parallel with the story of *Breath*'s performance. Beckett was asked by Kenneth Tynan to contribute with something for the 1970 review *Oh Calcutta* (a tasteless pun on "o quel cul t'as"), to which he responded with *Breath*. Tynan felt free to adulterate the text to accommodate naked bodies amongst the rubbish, which infuriated Beckett, but he was forbidden by contract from interfering. So what may have been a veiled comment on Beckett's part about Tynan's production turned back on him, aggravated by the fact that, due to the 1,314 performances of *Oh Calcutta* on Broadway (*GCSM*, 73), *Breath* remains the play by Beckett that the most people have seen (about 85 million just on Broadway). But perhaps more unfortunate than this is that in 1969 Grove Press actually published the adulterated text as being Beckett's, in a book which even included illustrations. It was not until 1972 that the unaltered text was published in a trade edition by Faber and Faber. Hirst's version then, seems to emphasise the absence of bodies by displaying rubbish where traces of bodies would be expected.

Physical defects and disembodiment aim at making the audience feel uncomfortable in their voyeuristic role. Showing a character in an uncomfortable position has the effect of making the audience uncomfortable as well, because of identification with the character and projection of oneself onto the performer. These devices also seem to stand for the inadequacy of human beings. Beckett seems to be making a point about how unfit we are to inhabit this world we have. There is no meaning of existence; all one can do is try to make one's way through life, making do with one's limited resources.

Do these characters' limited capacities, however, also stand for moral degradation? There certainly is a post-war feeling of the world gone wrong in his work, which is a characteristic of writers belonging to the same generation as Beckett did. Somehow, Beckett's characters became this way in history, albeit a history cut away from recognisable

referents, and they come to the audience as a picture of their present situation. Sometimes they try to tell where they come from, how they got here, other times one is confronted with a situation in the same way as they are, with no awareness of the process of degradation. Whether they acknowledge it or not, Beckett's characters are all in pain, they are on the edge of breakdown, they seem tired, exhausted, and doubtful that they will last another day, or heavy with the knowledge that they will, that they carry the burden of routine, of sameness, of no change and pessimism. Although they do not inspire sympathy, they don't arouse reproach either. Rather than moral degradation, Beckett seems to be trying to convey unfitness, impotence, alienation from the world, unmoored by any suggestionof personal responsibility.

MEMORY AND THE DISRUPTED SELF

I should not fail to portray man, in this universe, as endowed with the length not of his body but of his years and as obliged – task more and more heavy and in the end too great for his strength – to drag them with him wherever he goes.

- Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Estragon: All the dead voices...

Vladimir: They all speak together.

Estragon: Each one to itself...

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Characters in Beckett's plays are obsessed with telling their life stories. These accounts come to us as fragmented assemblages of memories with which we must try to reconstruct the characters' past lives and somehow make

sense of their present situations. They drag the burden of the years Proust refers to in the epigraph to this chapter wherever they go and bring them to the stage, the meeting place with an audience faced with those strange images of desolation, world weariness, deep regret and profound sadness. When plays start, we often find characters in the middle of something, that is to say, we catch them while they are doing something which they have done many times before and will carry on doing after we avert our eyes. And ears. Especially ears, I would risk saying, because most of these characters are trying to have their story told, make their part matter. According to John Calder in *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, the most important Beckettian dualism is the paradoxical wish to escape from the world and, at the same time, be recognised and remembered within it (33). In the terms of this duality, it would be the latter motive that compels his characters to repeat their stories endlessly, and yet the type of recognition that might be being reached for is scarcely unproblematic. Do M, W1 and W2 (*Play*) tell their story for the same reasons that M (*Footfalls*) or Mouth (*Not I*) tell theirs? Is Mouth even telling her own story? Why does Krapp (*Krapp's Last Tape*) keep editing the narration of his younger self? And how do we deal with the fact that all these characters are only borderline sane, or not at all?

It is widely accepted that narrative, in the form of the stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives, is the way through which one's sense of self, i.e., one's identity, is constructed. In Beckett's drama we get a clear feeling of characters whose sense of self has been disrupted by traumatic events. They are gazing out into the air, walking backwards and forwards aimlessly or standing stock still, their speech is fragmented and at times painfully dense. They hear voices. They are worn out by time and the memories they carry.

Although it is somewhat problematic to articulate Beckett exclusively within a postmodernist discourse, it is safe to acknowledge more than a few postmodern traits in his work, one of them being his engagement with the modes of representation of the self, namely through memory and that, as Jeanette R. Malkin observes in her book *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, is quintessentially postmodern: ”postmodernism is crucially bound up with agendas of remembrance and forgetting, serving, at least in part, to re-call the past from repression or from its canonized ‘shape’ in order to renegotiate the traumas, oppressions, and exclusions of the past” (1). Beckett was not alone in this ordeal, for still according to Malkin:

> an important group of theatre texts written since the 1970s exhibit an exceptional preoccupation with questions of memory, both in terms of their *thematic* attention to remembered (or repressed) pasts, and in terms of the plays’ “memoried” *structures*: structures of repetition, conflation, regression, echoing, overlap, and simultaneity (Malkin, 1).

Beckett was actually a little early according to this time frame. This tendency is visible in his dramatic work as early as 1952, in *Waiting for Godot*. Furthermore, he dealt with these issues academically much before that, when he wrote *Proust* (1931). Further along in this study, the chapter about repetition and symmetry will deal with the “memorised”

structure of plays; for the moment the thematic aspect of remembering the past will come under scrutiny. Malkin says Beckett is the exception in her book; the other authors she focuses on – Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks and Thomas Bernard – evoke a collective past grounded in common, or at least recognisable, historical and cultural backgrounds shared by their audiences in an attempt to renegotiate conflicting discourses with respect to the issues they deal with. In Beckett, memories are individual albeit speaking to and about universal traumatic events such as mourning, loneliness and regret. Nevertheless, his obsession with remembering, as well as that of the other authors refered to, "is part of a broader cultural longing for – and inability to – return to and have done with, the past" (Malkin, 10).

In "Towards a Writing without Power: Notes on the Narration of Madness", on the subject of the narrative representation of traumatic experiences, Brendan Stone argues that:

> the problematic of the unspeakable arises in the question of whether it is *possible* to fit the limit experience of shock, physical chaos, crisis, or acute suffering into a narrative, when such experiences are in themselves profoundly anti-narrational in character (17).

He goes on to question the seeming paradox of narrating limit experiences and contends that by transposing them into a narrative form, these experiences are necessarily being shaped into “something governed by order, sense, reason and progression” (17), themselves antagonistic to the nature of those experiences. We do, however, try to make sense of our lives by means of a narrative principle which, according to Theodore Sarbin in “Believed-in imaginings: a narrative approach”, is testified by “the readiness of human beings both to organize their experience and to interpret their social lives according to narrative plots” (Rivera and Sarbin, 15), something that can be attested, for example, in the way we report fantasies, daydreams, nightmares, daily life rituals, plans and rememberings: always following plot lines. And that is also true for the narration of traumatic and limit experiences.

The language in Beckett’s drama seems to work effectively for this type of narrative and to contradict, to some extent, Stone’s argument. Using such techniques as stream of consciousness, and providing his characters with speeches characterised by nonsense and non sequiturs, lack of eloquence, logical sequence and repetition, Beckett does achieve the difficult task of transposing traumatic experience into language in a vivid and successful way. For Jeanette R. Malkin, this is a feature of postmodernism, which brought about

> a shift in *the way we remember*, and hence in the way culture, and for our purposes, the theatre, represents

> and reenacts remembering. Where once memory called up coherent, progressing narratives of experienced life, or at least unlocked the significance of hidden memory *for* the progressions of the present, this kind of enlightment organization has broken down in postmodernism and given way to the nonnarrative reproduction of conflated, disrupted, repetitive, and moreover collectively retained and articulated fragments. This shift in the workings of memory is reflected in plays shaped through fragment, recurrence, and imagistic tumult (Malkin, 4).

In Beckett's drama, as self collapses, so does language. *Not I* stands out as a perfect example of this. It also supports Allen Thiher's remark in *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* that "Beckett's characters spend enormous amounts of logical energy saying the unsayable and speaking about the unspeakable" (132).

> The nature of the reports delivered by Beckett's characters, their haunting relation to the present and the significance of evoking the past can be understood in terms of the significance of the remembered self in the construction of the remembering self. The self is a work-in-progress, a perpetual construction, it is not fixed and it takes shape through the stories we tell others and ourselves. Of course, the assumption that one's self is a product of what we do implies that there is, or there should be, a high degree of consistency between action and mind as well as continuity between actions in the past and those of the present. This may not be a conscious association, but proof that

that assumption lies dormant in our heads is the fact that we choose to tell others some things and not tell other things, which shows our concern with the image we want to project of ourselves.

Rough for Theatre II echoes this concern in a rather extreme way, by making the life of a character depend on the assessment that two other characters make of his life, which, in turn, is supported by statements by his acquaintances. These statements mostly describe episodes in the character's life. The two men are at once enigmatic and hilarious angel-like characters who, instead of deciding whether the man should go to heaven or hell, are trying to decide whether he should live or die. But their real concerns are more "mundane", they are distracted from their job by things like the train timetable and a couple of finches they find in the room. The whole time, "C" has been standing before a window, possibly considering jumping, but at the end of the play "A" and "B" find out that "C" is already dead. One can only imagine that the reading of his acquaintances opinions about him killed him before he could make up his mind.

Katie Mitchell, who won the Time Out Best Director Award in 1996 for directing *Endgame* at the Donmar Warehouse, directed *Rough for the Theatre II* for the *Beckett on Film* project. She chose to have this play shot in black and white, and her version is clearly a film, not a filmed play. Here, the camera is free to focus on whatever it is interested in. There is also an expressionistic use of light, which works very well in accentuating the sinister aspect of the situation and finds a comical echo in the vaudevillian incident with the light fittings in the play. In film convention, back and white is often used to convey flashbacks, to represent actions in the past, and as the play deals with that exactly, looking back at the past, this seems to be an appropriate choice.

That which motivates characters to tell their stories seems to stem from different needs. There are those who try to bear witness to something that happened in their past, in the sense of reclaiming something for themselves, such as recognition for their martyrdom. These are characters like M (*Footfalls*), Listener (*That Time*) and Speaker (*A Piece of Monologue*). There are others who try to deny or

change their past in some way, such as Mouth (*Not I*) and Krapp (*Krapp's Last Tape*), those who are forced to do it by an exterior force: M, W1 & W2 (*Play*), and those, like Listener (*Ohio Impromptu*), who need to hold on to a time when things were not so bad, when it might still have been possible to.

In *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, James Knowlson suggests that *Ohio Impromptu* was inspired by Beckett's own imagining of the death of his life-long companion, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, and the painful feelings it would arouse. Regret and the impossibility of going back and undoing or re-doing the past are conveyed in the words:

> Could he not now turn back? Acknowledge his error and return to where they were once so long ago together. Alone together so much shared. No. What he had done alone could not be undone. Nothing he had ever done alone could ever be undone. By him alone (*CSP*, 286).

The awareness that there is no turning back, no undoing of what has been done and no doing of what has not, pervades Beckett's work. This impossibility informs and enlarges the sense of helplessness and regret most of his characters feel. And they shape their discourse accordingly. One remembers and tells events in the past in the light of what one knows now, while it is the benefit of hindsight that makes it possible both for a 'what if?' and for blaming oneself (and others) for decisions made in the past.

Beckett's stage directions for *Ohio Impromptu* are that Listener and Reader are "[a]s alike in appearance as possible" (*CSP*, 285). However, Charles Sturridge[23] made them into one single character by having one single actor, Jeremy Irons[24] (who consequently worked with the director again in *Longitude* (2000), the television adaptation of Dava Sobel's novel), playing the two roles. This change might very well have been to Beckett's taste, and he would probably have insisted on it, were it not for the impracticality that it represents for a play given the shortage of identical twins in the theatre. By having it this way, Sturridge's version tells us that *Ohio Impromptu* is really about a character recalling events. The synopsis of the play presented in the official website of the *Beckett on Film* project, www.beckettonfilm.com, reads:

> The Reader, it emerges, is a mysterious messenger from someone now dead and once loved by the Listener. The book the Reader reads from tells the story of the Listener mourning right up until the last moment, when the story is told for the last time and "there is nothing to tell".

[23] Initially Tom Stoppard was going to direct *Ohio Impromptu*, but he had to give it up in favour of other commitments.

[24] This was not the first time that Irons played two roles in the same film; he famously played twin gynaecologists in David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988).

The text, however, also supports an interpretation of Listener and Reader as one single person. The words “So from time to time unheralded he would appear to read the sad tale through again and the long night away” (*CSP*, 287) suggest that he recalls to keep himself entertained on sleepless nights, to find comfort and relief in the past. Furthermore, the promotional image for the play used on the website also invites a reading of Listener and Reader as two parts of the same character by depicting them joined at the waist, one facing upwards and the other downwards, as in playing cards (figure 14).

Figure 14 – King of Hearts: Jeremy Irons plays Reader and Listener in Charles Sturridge’s *Ohio Impromptu*

As with *Rough for Theatre II*, *Ohio Impromptu* is shot in black and white, again, a possible reference to recalling past events. Another aspect of this screen version is the movement of the camera circling the characters, encompassing them as it were, showing Reader and Listener are one and the same, as opposed to the fixed image of two separate distinct characters one gets when one is sitting in the audience. The text says that after the story had been told for the last time, the characters “sat on as though turned to stone” (*CSP*, 287), unaware of day breaking and other signs of life outside. In the last

seconds of the film, Sturridge actually shows this and makes the Reader vanish as street noises become audible and the room lights up, and the image acquires colour, except for the Listener, who remains in black and white, “[b]uried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness.” (*CSP*, 288)

In “Memory and the Narrative Imperative: St Augustine and Samuel Beckett”, James Olney suggests that all of Beckett’s late narratives take place in the mind, and that seems to be as true for *Ohio Impromptu* as it is for *That Time*, here directed by Charles Garrad, who also accumulated design credits for *Waiting for Godot* and *Act Without Words I* in the *Beckett on Film* project. Niall Buggy, who plays Listener, had already played this role in the original production of the play at the Gate Theatre under the direction of Robin Lefèvre. In this play, the voices talk about three different times in Listener’s past, and each one tells a different story. The image of the voices around his head actually triggers the image of voices inside his head. His eyes open and close, his facial expression reacts to what is being said, and in Garrad’s version, the head changes size in the picture. Another aspect of this film is that, despite having the possibility of adding a background to provide a context for the play (as other directors have done, such as for example Damien O’Donnel in *What Where* and Charles Sturridge in *Ohio Impromptu*), Garrad chose to maintain the disembodied head floating in darkness. These effects work towards a construction of the play as another one of Beckett’s recalling pieces, despite the fact that the voices refer to the Listener as “you”.

Figure 15 – Listener listens to

An important aspect to be taken into account is that many of the characters’ narrations are untrustworthy, possibly what Psychology terms

"believed-in imaginings", leading us to wonder what is at ontological stake in considering characters' reports as true. In *Not I*, Mouth insists that she is not the subject of the story she tells, but several clues indicate the opposite. Firstly, her discourse possesses the characteristics of a stream of consciousness, with repeated segments of discourse, lack of pauses, delivered very fast as if it was coming straight from her brain pouring out of her mouth. And then there is the figure of the Auditor who, as was pointed out in the previous chapter, was dropped out for practical reasons, but originally served as a regulator for Mouth's speech, suggesting that she was not telling the truth, that the story was, in fact, her own. In *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction*, Allen Thiher calls the separation of language and self a schizo-comedy. His argument is specifically about the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, where questions of language, memory and narration are central, but they also apply to Beckett's drama: "Beckett's work gives full expression to the voice alienated from itself, the voice for which the first- and third-person pronoun are a matter of indifference" (131). Thus Speaker's "Birth was the death of *him*" (*A Piece of Monologue*, *CSP*, 265,my emphasis) and the use of the second-person by the voices in *That Time*. This also suggests that Mouth's vehement repetition of "…what? …who? …no! she!" (*CSP*, 217) may not be a lie after all, but instead, a firm belief. And because there are some characters who try to deny their past, it seems reasonable to assume that other characters do the opposite, that is, tell stories about themselves which are not in fact their own or that have been made up.

Contrary to what was believed for many years, human beings are active in the construction of their worlds rather than being just passive recipients of the stimuli that surround them. According to Theodore Sarbin,

> [h]uman beings demonstrate complex systems for acquiring and processing information and, most

> significantly, the skill to function at various levels of hypotheticalness. (...) By entertaining hypotheses, a person can relocate self in different times and places (19-20).

Under this light, the question that imposes itself is how to make the distinction between narratives that refer to real events in someone else's life and narratives that are "believed-in imaginings". Everyday we need to make distinctions between "true" and "false" accounts, and we do that on the basis of our own notions of logic, consistency, consensuality, pragmatism, authority and other concepts that add up to establish a commonsensical ground for what we call truth. For the plays under scrutiny here, it is not so important to find out whether these accounts refer to things that have actually happened, but to understand how these narratives shape the lives of those who tell them.

When dealing with reports of things or events in the past, it is important to keep in mind that memory is a fabrication, a recreation of the original, and the extent to which that recreation is faithful to what actually happened isn't always controlled by the remembering self. In a review of three books about memory (Daniel Schacter's *How the mind forgets and remembers*, James McGaugh's *Memory and Emotion* and Rusiko Bourtchouladze's *Memories are made of this*) entitled "Reasons to forget: Scientists count the ways we get it wrong", John McCrone writes "The more closely psychologists study our power to recollect, the more it appears that we forget, distort, edit, select and generalize" (3)

and argues that the term “imaginative reconstruction” is more accurate than “recollection”. According to the same article, brains are not really built for retrospection and reflection, but for intention and anticipation. It emerges that forgetting is not the result of a faulty brain, but rather the natural consequence of its molecular structure, which dictates that cells (containing memory traces) die and are replaced by the minute. So the brain is rebuilt over and over again during one’s lifetime, disabling the metaphor of the brain as a repository of memories safely stored awaiting to be brought to the forefront by the process of remembering.

Saying it exactly as it happened is what the three characters in *Play* are desperately trying to do. They need to get their stories straight to put an end to their sufferings. Or at least they think so. So three versions of the same story are repeated *ad eternum* until the truth is told. But that is impossible, if nothing else because the same story is never the same for three different people involved in it. Also, when one shapes memories into speech, the description becomes the memory, and the event or situation can’t be recovered in a different way.

Anthony Minghella chose to abandon Beckett’s clear specification and vehement insistence on the existence of one single source of light focusing alternately on each of the three characters, and replaced the spotlight with multiple camera shots and zooms on the characters instead. Beckett’s vision of what the play should be created several technical difficulties in the staging of *Play*, such as synchronisation and speed, which would have been easier to deal with on camera. That these

heads are being forced to repeat their stories is only visible, in the film version, through the text, itself difficult to follow due to the dizzying speed with which it is supposed to be delivered. The text refers to a

Figure 16 – Anthony Minghela's *Play*

"hellish half-light" which does not exist in this version. Instead, there is an intrusive camera, which abruptly zooms in and out and cuts from one character to another, no matter whether at mid-speech, mid-sentence or mid-word. This is a glossy version of Beckett, which one can only guess would not have been to his taste.

Having said this, in a study entitled "Elements of Haiku in Beckett: The Influence of Eisenstein and Arnheim's Film Theories", Mariko Hori Tanaka connects Beckett's artistic vision to the film

theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Rudolf Arnheim. The concepts of "montage" and camera work are pointed out in this article as influences Beckett picked up from these two film theorists, who, in turn, were strongly influenced by the Japanese art of haiku. More specifically, the close-up (so much used in Minghella's *Play*) is indicated as the common ground for this apparently odd foursome: haiku, Eisenstein, Arnheim and Beckett. Tanaka justifies her argument in this way:

> Considering the visual effect of the part split from the whole in Beckett's works, the theoretical discussions of close-ups in Russian film – some of which were most likely part of his reading in 1935 – would be a starting point for the development of his own artistic vision of "wholeness-in-fragmentariness", in the phrase used by Jonathan Kalb (326).

This tendency towards visual fragmentation in Beckett's drama has already been somewhat dealt with in the previous chapter, namely in his display of the fragmented body. Fragmentation becomes relevant when we talk about memory because characters in Beckett's drama seem to remember in images, through verbal montage. Sentences do not follow a logical order, but they do tell a story in the whole. A story with a sequence which is not necessarily (or mostly) given by the text. As in Eisenstein's editing technique, readers of Beckett's plays are invited to create meaning in the gaps left by words as well as images.

The eminent death of an old lover, Ethna McCarthy, inspired the writing of *Krapp's Last Tape* in February 1958. The inspiration came, more specifically, from the clash between Beckett's memories of her young healthy self and the image of her descent into illness. This juxtaposition of images seems to have provided the form for the play. Beckett wrote it for Patrick Magee, the most famous Krapp to date, but it is John Hurt who plays Krapp in the *Beckett on Film*, under the direction of the Canadian Atom Egoyan (*Exotica, The Sweet Hereafter, Family Viewing*). This was not the first time that Hurt played Krapp though; he had done it before in a production of the play at the New Ambassador Theatre, under Robin Lefévre, who directs *A Piece of Monologue* in this project. Egoyan is a self-declared disciple of Beckett, and his participation in the project later originated and informed two art installations dealing with the representation of memory and mechanic reproduction.

On his sixty-ninth birthday Krapp is both listening to recordings made in the past and making new recordings. He chooses to listen to box 3, spool 5, the contents of which are "mother at rest at last", "the black ball", "the dark nurse", "slight improvement in bowel condition", "memorable equinox" and "farewell to love". These themes sum up the year's memorable events. But as the tape plays, Krapp tries to edit his memories by fast forwarding the tape to skip parts he wants to erase from his memory, and listens to others repeatedly. He thinks he was an idiot when he was younger and spurns his former sentimentalism. He

gets angry at his younger self because he doesn't like the image that the recording projects of himself. His actions can be explicated in terms of the importance of and the drive to create a positive image of the self. In "Literary and Psychological Models of the Self", D. Albright writes

> [w]e suppress extraneous parts of our being in order to show some lithe, smooth, shapely, consistent mask to the outer world – and perhaps to ourselves as well. How much of our remembered self is carefully, scrupulously edited in order to conform to some vision of how we would like our self to appear? If we speak of a remembered self, we should also speak of an editorial self that consciously or unconsciously selects the memories that wrap us around with the sense of our dignity, our erotic power, our nonchalance, our good will toward mankind, all those pleasures that our self-consideration craves (Neisser and Fivush, 32-33).

There is a clear separation between Krapp's former self and his present self, which obviously embarrasses and vexes him. And yet he keeps listening to his old tapes, a metaphor for playing memories in his head. During the play, Krapp also makes recordings for future memory. This act of keeping a diary is an exercise in nostalgia, despite Krapp's best

efforts to deny his sentimentality. Writing, or in this case, recording a diary is a desperate act to hold on to life, which is fleeting, it is a way of keeping memories alive and it supplies proof that one was there, that one existed and did things. Moreover, it is proof which will outlive one.

Photographs are also proof of existence. *A Piece of Monologue*, which was written in English in 1979, deals with them to some extent. A story about birth and death which originated one of Beckett's most famous quotes: "Birth was the death of him", it is a variation of the "born astride a grave" theme, so dear to existentialists and absurdists. At 82 ("Thirty thousand nights"), the Speaker looks back on his life and concludes: "Never were other matters. Never two matters. Never but the one matter. The dead and gone. The dying and the going" (*CSP*, 269). That one is born to die is asserted in all of Beckett's plays, but in this light, what is the meaning of remembering? There mustn't be one, as there isn't a meaning for life, one is lead to conclude. Beckett's characters just recall, the same way they just live, meaninglessly despite their quest for meaning.

The text of the play describes the shredding of photographs that once covered a wall: "Pictures of… he all but said of loved ones" (*CSP*, 266), coincidentally the wall the Speaker is looking at during the play. As Nicola King notes in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, photographs, still images, are one of the metaphors for memory: "[t]wo dominant and distinct ways of imagining memory (…) are as a series of photographs or visual images, or as a form of language or

narrative" (King, 25) and in this play, memory and photographs seem to play analogous roles. These particular photographs that are mentioned were of his parents and other loved ones. He "[c]ould once name them all. (...) Not now. Forgotten." (*CSP*, 266). They have been destroyed over the years, like pieces of memory that vanish, until all that is left is a blank wall. At the same time, over the years, the Speaker forgets, loses memory, in a movement that parallels the destruction of the photographs. The Speaker still looks at the wall, despite the fact that there is nothing to see anymore. The way things are described resembles a film, short sentences are used, like directions, as well as words, which in film context are technical, such as "fade", for example. Also, the text seems to describe camera shots like "Umbrellas round a grave. Seen from above" and "Coffin out of frame" (*CSP*, 268).

In her famous book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag says that photographs are objects of melancholy. Photos exist beyond the moments they immortalise. They also appropriate the thing photographed; the object (the photo) belongs to the beholder and so, in a way, does the thing or person portrayed. They have the power to evoke what is represented at any time, it is readily available and easy to carry. Photographs catch the fleeting moment and make it ever present. They immortalise things but are also a reminder of mortality, of the ephemeral. "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (Sontag, 16). In addition to these functions, "[p]hotographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral

distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past" (Sontag, 71). What Sontag is saying about photographs is what Beckett's characters do with memories – they use them as mental images to which they keep coming back. Photographs actively promote nostalgia, a feeling Susan Stewart refers to as a social disease in her book *On Longing*. According to Stewart, nostalgia is a social disease because the present is denied in the process of nostalgic reconstruction in favour of a past that takes on authenticity and authority. Because it always involves the displacement of attention into the past, the present is never fulfilled and everything becomes meaningless.

The generalization and widespread authority of psychoanalysis has determined that the past is the place to go to get answers and justifications for the present through the narrative (re)construction of one's life. Beckett's characters try to recover a past unchanged by the passing of time, their memories are suffused with a sense of loss and nostalgia. Narrative entails closure, but these characters can't find closure and thus can't find healing and peace. In his most recent book, *Oblivion*, French anthropologist Marc Augé argues that forgetting is as important as remembering; one needs to survive memory in the sense of escaping the omnipresence of the memory of traumatic experiences in one's life. Augé claims that forgetting is essential to being able to live the present, and not be chained to a painful past. And that's exactly what Beckett's characters can't do and that is why they are so tormented. In

Footfalls V asks M “Will you never have done… revolving it all? (*CSP*, 240) She probably won’t because in Beckett there is no relief in telling, but the other option does not prove to be better. When there is nothing left to tell in *Ohio Impromptu*, the Listener sits still like a rock, oblivious to the rest of the world.

REPETITION AND SYMMETRY

Waiting for Godot is a play in which nothing happens, twice.
- Vivian Mercier, _Irish Times_

Habit is a great deadener
- Samuel Beckett, _Waiting for Godot_

We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking.
- Camus, _The Myth of Sisyphus_

V

Vivian Mercier's much celebrated and quoted commentary on *Waiting for Godot*, that it was "a play in which nothing happened, twice"[25] could only have been written at such an early stage in Beckett's writing for the theatre, way before the dramaticules, where mostly nothing happens at all, but often more than twice. In *Play* and in *What Where*, for example, the same text is declaimed three times, while the number of plays where segments of the text are repeated and integrated with new passages isn't very far from the total number of plays he ever wrote. Although among his body of work *Waiting for Godot* is actually one of the plays where there is more action in the traditional sense of the word (think of Lucky and Pozzo's vaudevillian act), Mercier's "twice" was a sharp and early realization of a tendency that Beckett pursued (or maybe was pursued by) throughout his writing life: repetition.

[25] *Irish Times*, 18 February 1956 (quoted in HAYMAN).

The question of repetition is inevitably bound up with that of memory. In a way, remembering is repeating. When one recalls, one is experiencing the situation that is evoked over again. But more than just a side-effect to a thematic aspect of Samuel Beckett's writing, repetition appears as a structural, and indeed structuring, principle in his work. During the course of a typical Beckett play, actions will be repeated, the same words and even whole sentences will recur again and again, ideas will be reiterated. A third way in which repetition makes its way through into Beckett's dramatic work is the nature of the medium itself. As Jeanette Malkin notes, "[t]heatre is the art of repetition, of memorized texts and gestures" (3).

Beckett on Film adds other layers of repetition to Beckett's work. First, it was born out of a previous experience, which consisted of the staging of all the plays that were filmed; it is therefore a project that repeats a similar, more ephemeral project. The recording of these works in a more lasting medium enhances the potential for repetition exponentially, as it offers not only the possibility of repeated theatrical screening, but also broadcasting and, perhaps more importantly, through the selling of the *Beckett on Film* DVD box set,[26] unlimited domestic use. The official *Beckett on Film* website, www.beckettonfilm.com, repeats much of the information contained in "Check the Gate", the documentary that recorded the statements of directors, actors and producers during the making of the project, and that is included in the DVD set, which can, in turn, be purchased through the website. And, on a more technical note, repetition made its way through to *Play* and *Not I* in *Beckett on Film* by means of their diresctors' work method: both Anthony Minghella and Neil Jordan made their actor and actresses repeat the text several times, recorded several takes, then cut and edited them to match the original texts.

[26] The recording and release of the project on DVD also means that the product is less ephemeral than it would have been if it had used the technology available a few years ago, tape, a deteriorable medium.

In *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text,* Steve Connor expands on Jacques Derrida's theory of repetition:

> [r]epetition must always repeat originality, must always depend on some thing or idea which is by definition preexisting, autonomous and self-identical. Repetition is therefore subordinated to the idea of the original, as something secondary and inessential. For this reason, repetition is conventionally condemned in Western culture as parasitic, threatening and negative (3).

Connor goes on to demonstrate how the original is as dependent on repetition as repetition is on the original: the copy validates the original thing as it is only an original because there is another thing which is not. In Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, the author establishes a similar relationship between something original and another thing that is different to it, stressing the fact that difference is established in relation to something else, to a preexisting identity. Deleuze also conceives two different types of repetition: one that is completely faithful to its original and doesn't add to or change it in any way – "mechanical" or "naked" repetition; and another which takes the original one step further – "clothed" or "disguised" repetition.

In Beckett, repetition always adds another layer of meaning to what has been said or enacted before. Every time a segment of a text or an action is repeated, it opens new perspectives on characters, it says something more about who they are. As Connor put it, "[w]hile to a large extent repetition determines and fixes our sense of our experience and representations of that experience, it is also the place where certain radical instabilities in these operations can reveal themselves" (1). Repetition thus becomes a vehicle, a mode of representing the self available for the scrutiny of others, as well as for establishing a sense of

self (eg. through the reiteration of childhood stories, national and cultural history, etc).

Linguistic repetitions, as well as repetition of themes, action and movement can have the effect of making the act (be it of speech or of any other kind) lose its link to its meaning. Signifier and signified can be easily severed from each other. A simple experiment reveals how: when one says a word many times, preferably very fast, that word loses its connection to its referent to become an awkward sound that is not the original word anymore because its beginning and its end have merged with the beginning and the end of the same word repeated again and again, and it is now a completely different thing. It is something meaningless, and the lack of meaning is the feeling of the absurd. Albert Camus identified the moment when one becomes aware of the absurd: daily life, the endless repetition of the quotidian.

Repetition as a discursive resource to convey traumatic events has already been looked at in the chapter on memory, and in Beckett it ranges from general rambling to the more extreme situation of loss of coherent speech, as in *Not I*. As well as drawing one's attention to some thing(s), repetition (in its more monotonous manifestations) can also have the effect of distracting the attention from what is being said. No wonder that Beckett's plays often depend more on one strong visual image – a mouth, a head, three heads sticking out of urns – than on a text or a theme to remain alive in audiences' minds.

Political propaganda and advertising are good examples of the power of repeated discourses. In literary criticism too there are those who support a doctrine of repetition:

> repetition will emerge as something more than a principle of inert, indifferent plurality, and become visible as a principle of power, embodying authority, subordination, conflict and resistance. This displacing repetition, in which questions of

> knowledge and interpretation within literary texts return as questions of control and authority in critical discourse, will not leave those texts unchanged, for they themselves will now seem to require a rereading in the new terms of repetition as power (Connor, 14).

When Steven Connor wrote *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, he felt studies of Beckett's work stressed repetition as a weakening strategy. He points out that Beckett's claim that he was working with impotence implies a complex relation with power, for impotence exists in relation to power, or potency, and choosing to deal with one inevitably entails dealing with the other. Furthermore, in choosing to take the standpoint of the weak, the oppressed, the failed, giving them visibility, an outlet for recognition, is already in itself a strong statement. This is a position supported by Jeanette R. Malkin in *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, who contends that: "[o]n the social level, postmodernity has been broadly interpreted as a shift from the ordering impulse of modernist rationality to a release of control, a collapse of boundaries, a rejection of centre and hierarchy" (Malkin, 19). And as Connor notes, these power relations reverberate beyond the social level of interaction with others: "Beckett's works compel a sense of the complexities of power relationships as they are established and replicated, not only in the individual's relationship to his or her social world, but also in the deepest, most inaccessible solitudes of the self" (171).

What Where is a play dealing with power. Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom are the characters who share the stage with a megaphone, the source of another one of Beckett's disembodied voices. Each character is both victim and torturer in a cyclically structured play. Like *Catastrophe*, written for Václav Havel when he was imprisoned, *What Where* deals with politics and torture. The voice (which is Bam's) in *What Where* may also allude to the unseen structures of power that coerce both victims

and perpetrators into ideological systems. Its parallel entity in *Catastrophe* would be the figure of Director, here, a visible source of power and tyranny.

Beckett wrote *Quoi où* in 1983 and then translated it to *What Where* to be performed with *Catastrophe* and *Ohio Impromptu* under Alan Schneider's direction. He then directed *Was Wo* for the television in Stuttgart in 1985, but this was a completely different play to *Quoi où* – less repetitive, more stylised. The last play Beckett ever wrote was also the first to be shot for *Beckett on Film*, in December 1999. The director, Damien O'Donnel felt a context should be provided for the play to work as a film: "there is no set in the original play, but I argued that the whole play is about power and the abuse of power, and how information is power, so we used the library as a metaphor for somebody who has control of all the power and all the information" (www.beckettonfilm.com). The theme of repetition was further pursued and achieved by the use of the same actor (Gary Lewis) playing Bem, Bim and Bom, an option Charles Sturridge also made use of in the filming of *Ohio Impromptu*.

Another play dealing with the exchange and holding back of information and the power of those who detain it is *Come and Go*. It was written in English in 1965 for John Calder, simultaneously translated into French by the author as *Va et Vien* and first performed in Germany as *Kommen und Gehen* (translation by Elmar Tophoven) in 1966, a good example of the European scope of Beckett's work. According to *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*: "[t]he play echoes Eliot's 'In the room the women come and go,' but its situation the witches of *Macbeth*: 'When did we three last meet?'" (104). Flo, Vi and Ru, three women of undeterminable ages, sit side by side on a bench. When one is gone, the other two talk about her, disclosing some terrible secret that she is unaware of, possibly that she is terminally ill. The action is symmetrical, as is the dialogue. The three women exit the scene alternately and the two left move closer to each other to whisper in one another's ear. As in

Ohio Impromptu and *What Where*, Beckett's wish was that the women looked as much alike as possible, despite the different colours of their otherwise similar outfits. Unlike *Ohio Impromptu* and *What Where*, however, director John Crowley did not choose to use the same actress to play the three roles. In fact, they look very distinct from each other except for the hats that cover half the actresses' faces (the hats, nonetheless, have different shapes) and the different coloured overcoats that shape their bodies in a similar way. One thing Crowley didn't do (unlike *What Where*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Not I*, *Play*, but like *That Time*) was to create a context for the text. In the film as in the play, the lighting is "[s]oft, from above only and concentrated on playing area. Rest of stage as dark as possible" (*CSP*, 196). John Crowley also made use of the advantages of the medium he was using to pursue another effect that Beckett envisioned for *Come and Go*, and that is the exits of the women, which should not be seen going off the stage, but should rather disappear from the lit area. In the film, a vanishing effect was used for this purpose, creating a ghostly and eerie atmosphere which brings Ru, Vi and Flo closer to *Macbeth*'s witches, reportedly a source of inspiration for Beckett.

The motif of repetition also hints at the ad eternum quality of Beckett's plays. One often feels as if the author were opening a window on that character's life, that one is only allowed a quick peep, and after the window has been shut one realises that whatever one saw is still (or again) taking place. Such is the case with *Rockaby*. It was written in English in 1980. W, a prematurely aged woman, sits by the window in a rocking chair and listens to a voice – most likely her own – tell the story of her mother, which W herself is reenacting during the play:

> into the old rocker
> mother rocker
> where mother rocked
> all the years
> all in black
> best black
> sat and rocked
> rocked
> till her end came
> in the end came
> off her head they said
> gone off her head
> but harmless (*CSP*, 280).

Rockaby possesses the same ghostly atmosphere which is common to *Footfalls*. Movement – repetitive movement seems to be the only thing that drives them – and listening to the voices. W rocks, May walks, they both listen. As a matter of fact, both *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* could have been looked at in either of the previous chapters dealing with the body and memory, so interwoven are all these themes in these two plays. The reason they are being discussed here is because it is in the repetition of their actions that both their bodiliness and their memoried states take on their full proportions. There is a five year gap between the writing of the

two works (*Footfalls* was written in 1975 and *Rockaby* in 1980), but, however there is a continuum of theme and structure that brings them together.

Footfalls was written for Billie Whitelaw to accompany *That Time*. May is in tattered nightwear, W in her best black; the text actually specifies the dress should be profusely sequined to reflect the light as the character rocks back and forth. Both May and W interact with voices (the voice in *Footfalls* is May's mother, in *Rockaby* is W's). They compulsively repeat a movement in which they are locked in, which Malkin suggests "in some complex fashion, is connected to the repetitions of recall" (59-60). And more than simply recalling, Malkin asserts, "[b]oth women carry and repeat not only the traces of their own pasts, but also the memories and deaths inherited from their mothers, whom they become" (60-61). The similarities between the two plays don't end here. *Footfalls* is clearly divided into four parts, and *Rockaby* can also be said to be divided into four parts, W's insistence on "More" marking the beginning of each one. Jeanette R. Malkin also suggests the breathing in *That Time* acts as a structural divider as well as a way of marking time, like May's pacing and W's rocking (61). Both *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* are very musical, the text often rhymes; rhythm and timing are very important and are set by the paces and the rocking.

Whereas May and W are in a state of near death, the man in *Act Without Words I* is trying his best to stay alive – at least at the beginning of the play. Written in French in 1956, *Acte sans paroles I* was first performed in London as *Act Without Words I* in 1957. This mime has traditionally been performed in a double bill with *Endgame* and it is generally thought of as somewhat obvious. A man stands alone in the desert and cannot escape the frame/stage, being violently flung backwards every time he tries to do so. An external Pavlovian entity provides the protagonist with things (tree, scissors, cubes, carafe and rope) with which he is obviously not familiar, in the same way as he doesn't seem to be familiar with his hands. Through trial and error the

man tries to use these offerings as tools to make himself more comfortable – trim his nails, sit in the shade, reach for the water in the carafe –, but his attempts are frustrated by whoever or whatever provides him with these things in the first place. One by one, the things are withdrawn exactly when he is on the verge of being successful. Everything else failing, he looks conspicuously at the scissors and feels his neck, hinting at an intention to kill himself. But, as with everything else, the scissors are taken away from him, as is the rope with a lasso (potentially another death-dealing object), and he is denied the chance to carry out his intent. In the end, he just lies on the ground, not responding to the appearance of the objects that keep coming in the same order as they did before.

Suicide seems to be the only way to escape the place he finds himself in, but in one way or the other, suicide is always denied to Beckett's dramatic characters.[27] In *Waiting for Godot* Estragon looks at the tree and suggests "What about hanging ourselves?"(12). In *Rough for Theatre II*, B exclaims "Ah if I were only twenty years younger I'd put an end to my sufferings!" (*CSP*, 83). The characters in *Rough for Theatre I* also discuss suicide:

> B: (…) why don't you let yourself die?
> A: I have thought of it.
> B: [*Irritated*.] But you don't do it!
> A: I'm not unhappy enough. [*Pause*.] That was always my unhap, unhappy, but not unhappy enough.
> B: But you must be every day a little more so.
> A: [*Violently*.] I am not unhappy enough! (*CSP*, 69)

[27] Even in *Rough for Theatre II*, where one character is about to jump off the window and two other characters decide there is no reason why he shouldn't, he doesn't actually do it.

As usual, for all the talking that is done, no action takes place. Very much like Camus, Beckett refused suicide as a solution for life. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says of suicide: "[d]ying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering" (13). Despite having acknowledged this, Camus goes on to argue that suicide entails self-defeat and that that is not an appropriate answer to the absurdity of life and the world.[28] Having been denied the possibility to put an end to his life, all that is left for the man in *Act Without Words I* to do is sit and remain unresponsive to his surroundings.

Act Without Words I originally featured music by John Beckett, Samuel Beckett's cousin, but in *Beckett On Film*, the score is by Michael Nyman,[29] who famously wrote the soundtracks for Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), several Peter Greenaway's films, such as *The Draughtman's Contract* (1982), *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), and Neil Jordan's *The End of the Affair* (1999). This can be said to be the only significant change from the scripted mime for the film directed by Karel Reisz. An earlier film version to that of *Beckett on Film* was directed by Bruno and Guido Bettiol and produced by Cinéastes Associés in 1965 and cast puppets instead of actors.

There was also a film version of *Act Without Words II* previous to Enda Hughes's for *Beckett on Film*. In 1976, Paul Joyce filmed it as *The Goad*. Like *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II* was originally

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[28] This "optimistic" philosophy and general belief in human nature was to provoke a fallout between Camus and Sartre, who dismissed Camus's views as bourgeois and uncritical.

[29] Michael Nyman's score is also used in the display of the menu on every DVD that makes up *Beckett on Film*.

written in French around the same time as the former[30] and translated into English by Beckett himself but it wasn't performed until 1960, when it premiered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in London.

Act Without Words II is a showcase of habit and the quotidian repetition of gestures which are more often than not meaningless. Two characters, A and B, carry out their daily routine, which consists mostly of ablutions from the moment they wake up as it were (i.e. step out of their sack), until the time their day finishes (and they return to the sack). They are prodded by a goad on wheels and each, in turns, carries the sacks "bowed and staggering" (by the burden of life?) further left, so they move along the stage as the play progresses. A and B are very different: "A is slow, awkward (gags dressing and undressing), absent. B brisk, rapid, precise" (*CSP*, 49), but their fate is the same, the subtext being no matter what your take on life is, this is what it all must come down to: a meaningless repetition of useless actions. It is reminiscent of Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

> [r]ising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement (Camus, 19).

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[30] There is no consensus about the date when *Act Sans Paroles II* was written. In Grove Press's *Collected Shorter Plays*, Samuel Beckett is said to have provided the information that both mimes were written "at about the same time" (48), which would be 1956; *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (as the title indicates, put out by the same publisher), states that the play was written in 1958. This study has been using the *Collected Shorter Plays* as a source for dates of creation and of first performances, and this will be adhered to for the sake of coherence.

But the “why” never arises in these characters, there is no self-awareness of their status or their fate, which as far as the spectators are concerned, may go on forever. Ackerley and Gontarski argue a different ending for *Act Without Words II*: “The repetition suggests that they will be some day beyond the goad’s reach, but to what purpose? Without it to structure their days, will they remain immobile, comatose?” (*GCSB*, 5)

Enda Hughes filmed *Act Without Words II* for *Beckett on Film*. The writer’s indication was that “[t]his mime should be played on a low and narrow platform at back of stage, violently lit in its entire length, the rest of the stage being in darkness. Frieze effect” (*CSP*, 49). Hughes achieves a similar effect by having the action take place in a strip of film which is being projected onto a wall. The film thus cleverly uses the imagery of its medium as the backdrop for the play’s text. Almost as if it had been shot in stop motion, which creates an effect of the early days of cinema, the fact that it is silent adds to this feeling. The repetition of the action is interrupted by the breaking of the film in the projection machine, which suggests that the characters do go on repeating their rituals, as the end of their tasks is brought about by a failure in the medium, not by an element intrinsic to the action.

Just about all Beckettian characters are prisoners of habit in one way or the other. In *Endgame*, Clov asks Hamm “Why this farce, day after day?” to which Hamm answers “Routine. One never knows” (32), in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir acknowledges that “habit is a great deadener” (105). But the sisyphean quality of the lives of those who populate Beckett’s drama is something that they simply cannot escape; every action or resolution is always already defeated as demonstrated by the ending of *Waiting for Godot*:

> Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
> Estragon: Yes, let’s go.
> *They do not move.*

Curtain (109)

This same speech is said at the end of Act I, but in inverted order, that is, Estragon suggests that they go and Vladimir agrees (59), and again they do not move, which creates a symmetrical order within the play.

The symmetrical structure of many of Beckett's plays seems to reinforce the repetitive drive that runs through them. Symmetry is supposed to stand for perfection. Studies in biology and physiognomy have shown that the more symmetrical one's face is, the more attractive it becomes to the opposite sex, because it is a sign of good genes, good reproduction material. Symmetry is also a marker for beauty. Harmony and balance please the eye. And the ear – music has a shape, it tends to advance in circular fashion. The equilibrium provided by regularity is soothing and appeasing.

As usual, Beckett seems to make a perverse use of symmetry,[31] for rather than speaking to our notions of stability, it unsettles the spectator and contributes to a feeling of unease. Such as in *What Where*, where repetition and symmetry are associated with torture, reminding us that violence is a vicious circle and that victim and perpetrator are shifting concepts. The stage instructions for this play are worth looking at. The version published by Grove Press includes the false start that Beckett later eliminated for the television version of *What Where*, and that is the version filmed for *Beckett on Film*. This is the mime at the beginning, the scheme of the play, without words:

> [BOM *enters at* N, *halts at* 1 *head bowed.*
> *Pause.*
> BIM *enters at* E, *halts at* 2 *head haught.*

[31] Perhaps the most perverse use of symmetry of all, and one that was ultimately out of Beckett's control, is the ironic fact that the author was born on a Good Friday (13 April 1906) and buried on Boxing Day (although he died on 22 December 1989).

Pause.

BIM *exits at* E *followed by* BOM.

Pause.

BIM *enters at* E, *halts at* 2 *head bowed*

Pause.

BEM *enters at* N, *halts at* 1 *head haught.*

Pause.

BEM *exits at* N *followed by* BIM.

Pause.

BEM *enters at* N, *halts at* 1 *head bowed.*

Pause.

BAM *exits at* W *followed by* BEM.

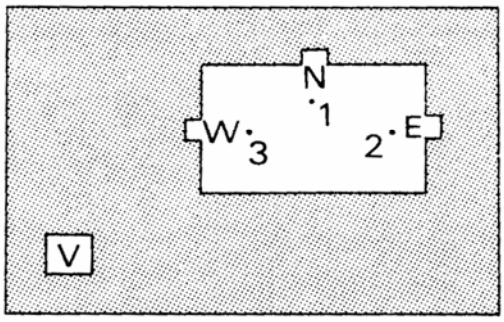
Pause.

BAM *enters at* W, *halts at* 3 *head bowed.*

Pause.] (*CSP*, 311)

The movement of the characters forms a triangle, as indicated in the positions of the letters and numbers in the image below (figure 17)

Playing area (P) *rectangle 3m × 2m, dimly lit, surrounded by shadow, stage right as seen from house. Downstage left, dimly lit, surrounded by shadow,* V.



General dark.
Light on V.
Pause.

Figure 27 – Stage directions for What Where

The motion of the characters in Come and Go also reflects a preoccupation with symmetrical aesthetics, as shown in the image that follows (figure 18), where Beckett not only takes care in indicating the way the characters move on and off the stage, or rather, out of and into one's field of vision, but also the way Flo, Vi and Ru hold hands, which again happens in a symmetrical fashion, where each one holds one of the other two's hands. They form a self-contained chain, the symmetry of the image mimicking a gesture of harmony, mutual understanding and unity, which both is and is not. The audience knows these three women talk about each other behind the others' backs, and although they seem to adopt an attitude of solidarity and support towards the one that is absent, the piece of information they are holding back is vital. However, they are united both by a similar fate which each one of them is unaware of, and by the fact that the other two know something about the third one but will not tell her what is happening. Ignorance about their individual fates and ignorance about the gossip about them is the thing that brings them together.

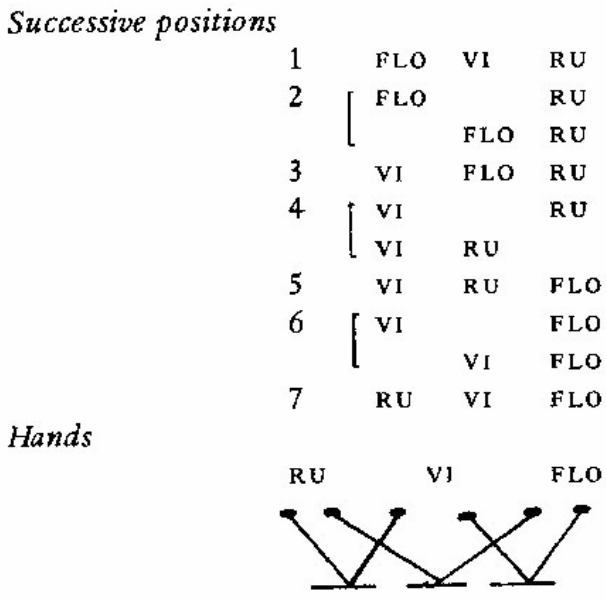


Figure 18 – Beckett's stage directions for *Come and Go*

There is another aspect in which symmetry manifests itself in this play and that is in the words of the characters when they inquire and offer

opinions about the third absent party: they do not use the same words, although they certainly mean the same things.

Unlike *Come and Go*, in *Play* the form of speech of the characters does not obey a strict pattern, but like *Come and Go*, *That Time* does have an underlying symmetrical sequence (although, in untypical Beckett fashion, it is not explicit in the text). Ackerley and Gontarski describe the pattern in this way: "[t]he pattern of narrative and voice before the first pause is ACB ACB ACB CAB; the next CBA CBA CBA BCA; and the third is BAC BAC BAC BAC. There is no instance of ABC, but the regularity of the third pattern generates a sense of order and hence serenity" (570). In *What Where*, the sequence that was discussed above follows another (natural) sequence, that of the seasons of the year: spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Act Without Words II progresses in a linear way along the stage, as shown in figure 19. The symmetry arises in A and B's daily rituals which, albeit not the same, parallel each other. Furthermore, the differences between the two characters and the way they carry out their tasks are opposedly symmetrical. Whereas A is untidy, B is impeccable; A is pensive, B is brisk; A takes pills, B exercises; A prays, B consults his watch and winds it, and so on. Symmetry here seems to be nudging towards an existential comment: that two essentially different approaches to life really boil down to the same thing, the same fate, the same meaninglessness. Also, the pattern of the positions of both characters (A and B) and sack (C) is repeated in a symmetrical way as they move farther left, as shown in the picture below

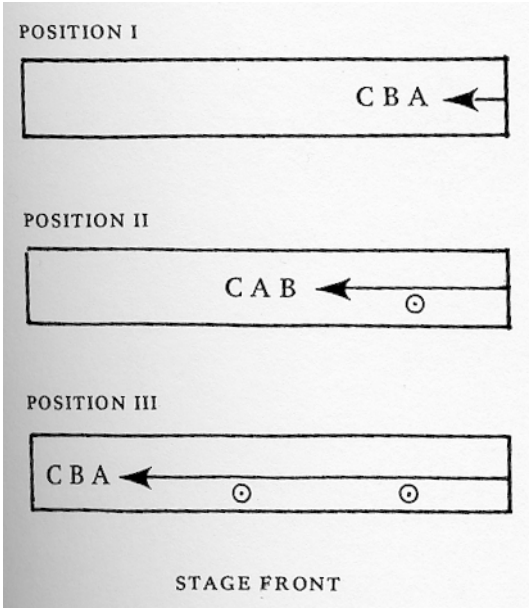


Figure 19 – Stage directions for *Act Without Words II*

Repetition enters the equation when A is prompted back into action and starts doing the exact same things as he did the first time, but that is also when the mime finishes.

In the plays that have been discussed, actions follow a pattern. Mostly they reflect other actions that have happened before, not quite repeating them, but rather mirroring them, presenting them from different angles. Whereas the movement in *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* is repetitive with minimal variation (rocking back and forth, pacing backwards and forwards), the structure of both plays obeys a symmetrical order. Both film versions of *Footfalls* by Walter Asmus and *Rockaby* by Richard Eyre concentrate on the quasi mechanical movement of both characters and the almost inhuman aspect of their condition by closing in on their expressionless faces, a resource that is unavailable to theatre performances.

The discussion about repetition and symmetry would not be complete though if the symmetry of Beckett's pseudocouples was not mentioned again.[32] The equilibrium of unity is deconstructed by Beckett

[32] See chapter "The Dramatic Body"

when he refuses his characters basic human capacities, which are usually taken for granted, such as eyesight, mobility, etc. Thus, in Steven Connor's words,

> [Beckett's] early works show the hopeless, habitual wanderings of characters struggling to escape from habit, even though they are themselves constitutively enslaved by it. Subsequent characters go on to repeat with variations what these early characters say and do, to such an extent, in the end, that our sense of the individuality of characters in Beckett's work is very difficult to sustain (1).

Nonetheless, it is also fair to say that the author provides characters with complementary characteristics and offers them the chance of complementing each other. It is the flawed nature of human beings that renders collaboration and harmony impossible. Further, it is also the impossibility of extracting meaning out of life, the compulsion to go on ("I can't go on, I'll go on") and the inevitability of repetition that are the strongest shaping forces in Beckett's characters, forces that the resources of film have captured particularly well in *Beckett on Film*, it appears to me, and which they will now present in identical form for the remainder of history.

CONCLUSION

Make sense who may. I switch off.
- Samuel Beckett, *What Where*

The DVD box set of *Beckett on Film* includes a documentary made during the shooting of the project. Directed by Pearse Lehane, *Check the Gate – Putting Beckett on Film* recorded statements of both directors and actors involved in it, as well as the producers of *Beckett on Film*, Michael Colgan and Alan Moloney. The key to enjoying the project is to watch the documentary after seeing the films. *Check the Gate* starts off on a bad note by saying that Beckett was James Joyce's secretary, which is an error introduced by Deidre Bair in her biography of the author that, for some reason, has stuck in the popular imagination.[33] This statement predisposes the knowledgeable spectator against what she/he is

[33] Beckett was one of several young artists that Joyce surrounded himself with, and indeed Beckett did help with the research for *Finnegans Wake* (1939), even to the extent of writing down parts of the text as Joyce dictated it to him given that Joyce's eyesight was very bad and he tried not to strain it. Joyce was a friend and a mentor to Beckett, but the latter was never the former's secretary.

about to see. But soon the memory of this piece of badly researched information vanishes in the face of the issues the documentary picks up.

As with critics, directors and actors' opinions diverge as to whether Beckett's work is pessimistic or uplifting, but they are unanimous in recognising Beckett's genius and inventiveness. Many feel, however, they can add something to his work. From the evidence of their words, the participants obviously think that film is a good vehicle for taking Beckett to the masses, and that does not simply mean that film provides physical access to the work in performance, but also with respect to its intellectual accessibility – a symptom of the old stigma that associates stage drama with high culture and film/television with low culture. It goes without saying that this is not necessarily the case. And ultimately, it is not the case with *Beckett on Film* either. The project is a rather elegant rendition of Beckett's work, and with the exception of a couple of pieces, a good representative of the Beckett legacy. But seeing the films is one thing, and listening to the participants talk about them is another.

Perhaps Neil Jordan is not completely out of line when he says that the only boring thing about Beckett is his commentators, but with directors like Michael Lindsay-Hogg[34] who compares Beckett to John Lennon and says the lines "Help, I need somebody… not just anybody" as if they were a piece of poetic wisdom that sums up Beckett's philosophy of despair, commentators do have reason to worry. Luckily, Lindsay-Hogg's fascination with The Beatles is not apparent in his film of *Waiting for Godot*, but the same cannot be said about Neil Jordan's fascination with Julienne Moore, who lends more than just her mouth to

[34] Probably more famous for *The Object of Beauty* (1991), the television adaptations of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1985) and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1989), as well as for sharing the directing credits of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) with Charles Sturridge, Lindsay-Hogg has directed several documentaries about bands and musicians such as Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Young, The Rolling Stones, The Who, and, alas, The Beatles.

Not I for no apparent reason other than to confirm the presence of a Hollywood star in the film.

There are many stars in *Beckett on Film*, with special emphasis on Irish ones, and watching the documentary it becomes clear from the outset that Irishness is a big issue. The producers could have spared themselves and the project a lot of criticism if they had refrained from the parochial desire to reclaim Beckett and his oeuvre as Irish. The documentary takes its name from the Gate Theatre in Dublin, the place where the 19 plays were first performed together, also produced by Colgan (the artistic director of the Gate at the time), and in a very similar format to that of *Beckett on Film*. In *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, under the entry "Gate Theatre", Ackerley and Gontarski make their point in a rather demure way: "objecting to an obituary that mourned [Samuel Beckett] as a great loss to France, Michael Colgan, the artistic director, followed this in October 1991 with a triumphant Beckett festival, *the prodigal son reclaimed*" (218, emphasis added). Also, the aim of the Beckett festival, as acknowledged by Ackerley and Gontarski, was already that which came to govern *Beckett on Film*, which consisted of "bringing [the plays] to new audiences, and underlying their Irish intonation" (218). But "Check the Gate" also has other resonances. "Check" sounds like an attempt at jazzing up the project by using a coloquial "checking something out" (presumably what is happening at the Gate Theatre), and gatekeeping is that activity carried out by the official, or more usually self-appointed guardians of knowledge in the maintenance and preservation of canons and the exclusion of the "unserious" or "unworthy" from privileged domains. In the case of Beckett, those domains would be high culture and Irishness. So the echo in the title of the documentary speaks both of a monopolising urge on the part of the project's creators as well as their attempt to make the product attractive and desirable to as wide an audience as possible.

The irregular length at which each play/film has been discussed in this study is related to each play/film's degree of engagement with the

broad themes that are being dealt with – memory, repetition and the body; some illustrate certain points better than others. However, as it was also important to scrutinise the differences and similarities between the plays and the films, the later (shorter) plays/films have probably been looked at in more detail because, as Beckett's style became more distilled, minimal as it were, the more scope there is for directors in *Beckett on Film* to add to the plays, as context was one of the very few things that directors could take liberties with. The fact that *Beckett on Film* consists of films of Beckett's plays rather than filmed plays becomes more apparent and the distinction between play/performance text/performance and film more poignant in the shorter pieces. As Shimon Levy points out in *Samuel Beckett's Self-Referential Drama: The Sensitive Chaos*, "[l]ack of specificity on stage naturally avoids the realistic fallacy; rather, it calls for a process of 'gap filling'" (27). In *Beckett on Film*, the gap is filled by the director, who interprets the play and provides a meaningful context which is absent from the original text. Except for *That Time* and *Come and Go*, when the text of the plays requested an empty stage, the films have provided the surroundings with a greater (*What Where*, *Ohio Impromptu*) or lesser (*Not I*) degree of success. There is, nonetheless, something to be lost in the additioning of background:

> [i]n presenting a stage full with emptiness, Beckett activates the audience's imagination and involvement, and extends an invitation to make this stage space their own: a well-furnished fully decorated stage is perhaps more appealing at first sight. Yet, as Peter Brooke emphasized, it cannot compete with the suggestiveness of an empty space (Levy, 27).

By trying to make everything explicit, *Beckett on Film* damages the bond that Levy identifies between the pieces and the audience. It also presupposes that the audience can't be trusted to "get it right" unless everything is explained. Such a patronising attitude towards spectators was absent from Beckett's work, and he, furthermore, refused to explain anything about his plays when asked about their meaning. The one and only critic who is consulted in the documentary, Tom McGurk, and whose opinion, coincidentally is not favourable to the project, argues against this same mediation of the works through an interpretative camera, which chooses angles, zooms in and out on faces and objects, directs the audience's attention as it pleases (as opposed to the freedom of taking everything in at once or bits at a time during a live performance, when the stage is there all at once, all the time). Speed is another factor mentioned by directors, who are all too aware of contemporary audiences' limited attention span. *Endgame*, for example was made faster (thus more vaudevillian), thanks to the fact that sound can be captured on film much more easily than it can be heard in live performance, so pauses can be shorter and actors can speak more slowly without compromising intelligibility.

Towards the end of *Check the Gate*, Michael Colgan says Beckett does not need to be protected. That is true. Shakespeare has survived all sorts of adaptations and fanciful "inspired by" work, which has made him more popular than the plethora of academic studies about the bard and his oeuvre might indicate. So why do Beckett scholars tend to be so protective of their subject? Well, for one thing they are often people who knew and worked with him and who try to follow what they know were Beckett's wishes, and the greatest of these was that his work be performed as he wanted it to be performed, and not according to someone else's idea of what it should be. With this point in mind, a relevant final question to ask would be "does the project change the work?" My answer would be: "not substantially", although no doubt some of its aspects would have angered Beckett. Having said this,

Samuel Beckett is the most important playwright of the 20th century, yet a great part of his work is largely unknown to most people. Having the bulk of Beckett's work readily available must be considered highly advantageous. The films are both useful for Beckett fans and effective in attracting first timers. An indicator of audience response to the project can be found on the Internet Movie Database.[35] IMDb lists every one of the films in *Beckett on Film* separately and gives them an approval rating, or rather, on this site registered spectators can rate the films. *Footfalls* ranks last among its peers with 4.7/10 and *Play* comes in first with 8.3/10. After *Play*, *Waiting for Godot*, *What Where*, *Endgame*, *Ohio Impromptu* and *A Piece of Monologue* are the films that get better ratings, but all of them, except for *Footfalls* and *Breath* (5.9/10) get more than 6/10,[36] which seems to suggest that for that wider target public Beckett does work on film.

As time goes by, and as copyright disappears, other productions will inevitably appear which will not need the endorsement or permission of the Beckett estate, and one can imagine radical adaptations and interpretations of his work. People tend to feel very strongly about Beckett's work because it speaks to something deeply rooted in and universal to human beings' existence – that life is tragicomic and that all one can do is go on. At the heart of this vision is the suggestion that all going on is essentially the same, and yet it seems clear that when copyright expires on the Beckett estate's control over his works (in 2058) very different versions of Beckett will be produced; indeed, in all likelihood showing that going on can be more various. The probability is

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[35] www.imdb.com, an amazon.com company which claims to be the "Earth's biggest moviebase".

[36] Search carried out in March 2006 on www.imdb.com. By way of comparison, one might note that Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) gets 6.8/10, while this year's winner of the Academy Award for best feature, *Crash* (dir. Paul Haggis) scores 8.3/10.

then that *Beckett on Film* will solidify its status as a representative of a time when Beckett's wishes still prevailed.

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Samuel Beckett. *Film* (dir. Alan Schneider, Evergreen Theatre, 1965)

***BECKETT ON FILM*:**

A Piece of Monologue (dir. Robin Lefevre, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Act Without Words I (dir. Karel Reisz, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Act Without Words II (dir. Enda Hughes, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Breath (dir. Damien Hirst, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Catastrophe (dir. David Mamet, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Check the Gate (dir. Pearse Lehane, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001) [documentary]

Come and Go (dir. John Crowley, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Endgame (dir. Conor McPherson, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Footfalls (dir. Walter Asmus, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Happy Days (dir. Patricia Rozema, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Krapp's Last Tape (dir. Atom Egoyan, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Not I (dir. Neil Jordan, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Ohio Impromptu (dir. Charles Sturridge, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Play (dir. Anthony Minghella, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Rockaby (dir. Richard Eyre, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Rough for Theatre I (dir. Kieron J. Walsh, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Rough for Theatre II (dir. Katie Mitchell, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

That Time (dir. Charles Garrad, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

Waiting for Godot (dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

What Where (dir. Damien O'Donnell, Blue Angel Films and Tyrone Productions, 2001)

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